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srichey@gsu.edu

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benjamin.taylor@kennesaw.edu

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ii
Conflicting Norms: The Case of Gerrymandering Drew S. Cagle.....	1
Getting Off the Roller Coaster: Reflections on the 2024 Elections Jamie L. Carson and Steward Ulrich.....	13
Front-end or Back-end? Automatic Voter Registration Method and The Implications for Voter Turnout in the 2022 Midterms Megan Wall.....	30
The Challenges of Undergraduate Research Methods Education in Political Science Tracy Lightcap.....	42
Municipal Golf Courses and Social Change John R. Bennett, J. Scott McDonald, Keith A. Merwin, Gerald A. Merwin Jr.	52
Evaluating the Fiscal Impacts of City-County Consolidation: Revenue Diversification and Stability in Macon-Bibb County, Georgia Min Su Kim.....	59
Owning Womanhood in the Republican Party: Examining Gender Ownership in Political Campaigns Catherine Funk	70
Is It Better To Debate A Question Without Settling It Or Settle A Question Without Debating It? Hypotheses About Televised U.S. Presidential Debates John A. Tures.....	92
The Rise of Political Polarization and Democratic Backsliding Alyssa Archer.....	113

Questions in Politics

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Preface

It is with great pleasure that we present Volume XII of *Questions in Politics*, the official journal of the Georgia Political Science Association. This volume highlights the intellectual rigor, creativity, and dedication of scholars working across various subfields of political science. We sincerely congratulate the authors whose work appears here. Their research reflects not only the diversity of questions driving our discipline but also the shared commitment to advancing knowledge through careful inquiry and thoughtful analysis.

About the Issue

Although this volume does not focus on a single theme, the articles collectively address some of the most pressing issues in modern political life: democratic integrity, voting behavior, institutional reform, political identity, and the evolving challenges of political science education. Covering topics from local governance to national elections, and from methodological innovation to normative theory, these contributions provide valuable insights into the forces shaping our political world.

We begin with Drew S. Cagle's award-winning paper, "Conflicting Norms: The Case of Gerrymandering," recipient of the 2025 McBrayer Award. Cagle's experimental study reveals partisan asymmetries in attitudes toward fairness in redistricting, highlighting how normative appeals resonate differently across party lines. Jamie Carson and Stewart Ulrich follow with "Getting Off the Roller Coaster," a timely reflection on the 2024 U.S. elections, offering a detailed account of the unprecedented presidential race and its implications for future governance.

Megan Wall's analysis of automatic voter registration in "Front-end or Back-end?" explores how policy design influences turnout, while Tracy Lightcap's "The Challenges of Undergraduate Research Methods Education" addresses the pedagogical shifts required to meet the demands of a rapidly changing discipline. In "Municipal Golf Courses and Social Change," Bennett, McDonald, Merwin, and Merwin Jr. examine the overlooked civic and environmental roles of public golf courses, calling for renewed attention to their place in urban life.

Min Su Kim's "Evaluating the Fiscal Impacts of City-County Consolidation" provides a rigorous assessment of revenue diversification in Macon-Bibb County, offering comparative insights into the promises and limits of consolidation. Catherine Funk's "Owning Womanhood in the Republican Party" introduces a novel framework for measuring gender ownership in political campaigns, based on an extensive content analysis of candidate advertisements.

John Tures's "Is It Better To Debate A Question Without Settling It...?" investigates the influence of televised presidential debates on voter behavior and electoral outcomes, offering hypotheses grounded in empirical trends. Finally, Alyssa Archer's "The Rise of Political Polarization and Democratic Backsliding," winner of the 2025 Pajari Award for best undergraduate paper, uses cross-national data to demonstrate the link between polarization and democratic decline.

We invite scholars to submit their work for consideration in Volume XIII of *Questions in Politics*, to be published after the 2025 GPSA Annual Meeting. Submissions from all subfields and methodological approaches are welcome, and we especially encourage papers presented at the conference to be revised and submitted for peer review. We look forward to continuing the tradition of highlighting outstanding political science research from across Georgia and beyond.

Thanks to the Reviewers

As always, we are deeply grateful to the reviewers for Volume XII. We received a high-quality selection of papers for this volume, which required us to assemble an exceptional group of reviewers. Along with ourselves, each article was peer-reviewed by scholars whose expertise could assess the quality and importance of the submitted manuscript. Our reviewers' insights, suggested edits, and revisions elevated the quality of the work

presented in this journal. Being a journal reviewer is often a thankless task, and—though it may be a small gesture—we want to sincerely thank our reviewers.

Sean Richey & Ben Taylor

Questions in Politics

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Conflicting Norms: The Case of Gerrymandering*

Drew S. Cagle¹

¹College of Coastal Georgia, School of Arts & Sciences, dcagle@ccga.edu

*2025 McBrayer Award Winner

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the role that a normative framing of gerrymandering plays in affecting support for fairness. Using a novel survey experiment, $n=1000$, we show that while broad support for political equality and fairness is high, providing normative information about the counter-democratic outcomes of partisan redistricting can increase this support marginally. Interestingly, this finding is much more pronounced for Democrats than Republicans, who are much more responsive to partisan cues. Even further, Republicans seem much more willing to express a willingness to continue engaging in unfair redistricting rather than risk losing control (power) in Congress. Together, these findings highlight a troubling asymmetry along party lines regarding support for fairness within democracy. Republican support for fairness does not seem uniform, as the concern of possible loss alters perceptions about what is most crucial.

Redistricting is like an election in reverse! It's a great event. Usually, the voters get to pick the politicians. In redistricting, the politicians get to pick the voters.

Thomas Hofeller, Redistricting Official, State of Pennsylvania

Introduction

One of the foundations of democratic government is political equality: democracies should promote civil rights, and all citizens should be allowed participate in the political process (Dahl, 2007). Political equality exists when each citizen carries equal weight conducting public business and exercising free expression. These democratic norms¹ are rarely explicitly codified in text; rather, they are socially agreed upon rules formalized over time by mutual acceptance and routine compliance and maintenance. Like other norms, political equality requires upkeep in order to function appropriately (Bergen, 2021). Norms are maintained by a continuing agreement to comply with the norm and to punish or otherwise hold accountable those who violate them. These norms prohibit behaviors such as political violence, mean and offensive speech, and unfair election procedures.

Citizen support for “democracy as a form of government,” and, by extension, the abstract norm of political equality, is uniformly and robustly high (Inglehart, 2003; Graham and Svobik, 2020). However, it is difficult to reconcile this public opinion with democratic “backsliding” among the states (Grumbach 2022). Moreover, while unrestrained and pervasive norm-breaking has historically been viewed as something common to authoritarian regimes or “pseudo-democracies,” the prevalence of norm-breaking has increased within even the most mature and “stable” democracies (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Clayton et al., 2021). Often, the literature on public opinion about norm-breaking is limited to citizens’ reactions to *social* norm-breaking, such as political elites engaging in uncivil behaviors. Politicians sometimes engage in this social norm-breaking by making uncouth comments about political opponents, such as Rep. Lauren Boebert’s (R-CO) insinuation that her fellow Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) was a radical terrorist. Gerrymandering, on the other hand, violates norms that are fundamentally political, rather than social, in nature, but has received less scholarly attention as democratic norm-breaking. What happens to commitments to abstract norms, like equality, when politics intervenes?

In the case of political equality, it is unclear how partisan redistricting, which is presumably conducted to *balance* democratic power, might alter perceptions of democratic norms when framed in a normatively “bad” or “anti-democratic” way. To some extent, gerrymandering is an institutional norm violation in that it attempts to stack the odds in favor of one party or the other during otherwise agnostic redistricting processes. Gerrymandering is “legal” insofar as the Supreme Court tends to demur on challenges to state electoral maps, but normatively, gerrymandering runs directly counter to our expectation of fair play and even representation because it can effectively engineer “safe and uncompetitive” districts wherein the argument can be made that each person’s vote does *not* weigh the same (Chen & Cottrell, 2016). Further, it is unclear how providing a normative framing about gerrymandering’s relationship to these democratic principles may change individual attitudes about the redistricting process and the importance of maintaining political power.

¹The term “democratic norms” works as a catch-all construct that includes the social, legal, and procedural norms that make politics possible. While separate literatures have developed around these different types of norms, our view is that violations of any type can drastically alter democratic outcomes.

Borrowing from works on affective polarization (Kingzette et al., 2021) and norm-breaking (Graham & Svulik, 2020; Simonovits et al., 2021), this paper investigates the roles that gerrymandering and the democratic frame-game play in shaping United States citizens' attitudes towards political equality. To explore these relationships, we conduct a novel survey experiment that shows (1) partisans generally do agree that fairness and equity in the political process is important, and (2) this finding applies to both Democrats and Republicans. However, when in-party considerations are introduced, we find significant differences across partisans that illustrates a thorny principle-implementation gap. For example, while professed support for political and legislative compromise is high, the most partisan amongst the public are unwilling to acquiesce on their policy demands (Davis, 2017; Wolak, 2020). Similarly, while there is a robust professed distaste for political scandal, individuals enforce this distaste along partisan lines, punishing out-party politicians much more harshly (Bhatti et al., 2013). In the case of gerrymandering, Republicans seem slightly less willing to agree that politicians should not draw partisan districts, and, when exposed to a partisan cue, are unwilling to agree that Independent Districting Commissions should draw congressional districts rather than state legislatures. Finally, Republicans seem slightly more willing to approve gerrymandering to obtain/maintain legislative control than Democrats, even when gerrymandering is framed as un-democratic itself. These findings highlight a need to think carefully about how scholars depict norm frames, especially when norms come into conflict with other established procedural processes and illustrate the conditions under which some partisan may pay lip service to democratic (Cagle, 2023; Graham and Svulik, 2020).

In what follows, I outline the concepts of redistricting, its intended purpose, and its perversion through gerrymandering. Then, I present a novel theoretical construct for understanding how the frame game affects citizens support for gerrymandering and political equality.

Redistricting and Representation

In *Federalist No. 56*, Madison wrote: "It is a sound and important principle that the representative ought to be acquainted with the interests and circumstances of his constituents" (Yoshinaka & Murphy, 2011). Connectedness with constituents is more likely to occur if Representatives can make direct interpersonal relationships with individuals (Fenno, 2000). Representatives must possess some knowledge of their constituents' interests, and, in a democracy, descriptive representation, that is, the notions that the legislative body should closely mirror the sociodemographic makeup of the electorate, is often desired. The United States attempts to accomplish these lofty goals through legislative districts, arbitrary geographical areas containing a relatively equal number of people within each one (Yoshinaka & Murphy, 2011).

One of the central questions the Framers tackled in the Constitution was how to ensure relatively even representation in the legislature (Dworkin, 1989). Despite this, the Constitution provides no information on *how* to structure legislative districts. However, in the 1960s, the U.S. Supreme Court heard several landmark cases ostensibly to ensure that the "one person-one vote" rule of democracy was reflected in congressional districts. They did so by requiring states to regularly redraw districts to ensure an "approximate population equality across congressional districts," drawing on the equal protection clause of the 14th amendment to do so (McGhee, 2020; Erikson, 1972). This means that, in theory, the practice of state legislatures redrawing districts post-census is actually a method of norm-maintenance, working as an institutional bulwark against violations of political equality and equal access to public business. The process should ensure that there is parity in the power of voters and that votes are not "wasted."

Despite the intentions of redistricting, scholars tend to agree that the practice ends up increasing instability for representatives and constituents (Gelman & King, 1994). For the Representatives themselves, incumbents generally enjoy a distinct advantage in electoral contests (Prior, 2006). So, if current Representatives are doing well, they would prefer to leave their district unchanged (Yoshinaka & Murphy, 2011). Research in the 1990s found that introducing "new" voters into a district's status quo upset the incumbent advantage (Ansolabehere et al., 2000). However, this decision is not always left up to the incumbent. For example, in 2020, Tennessee divided a longtime Democratic district into three Republican ones, ousting the 20-year incumbent.

Instead of ensuring equal representation, redistricting may increase electoral opportunity costs for the public itself (Hayes & McKee, 2009). When redistricting occurs, and voters are shifted into new districts, they are left with little to no information about their incumbent, raising information costs (Downs, 1957). Given that House districts are lower in salience (Jacobson, 2004), heuristics become exceedingly important to citizens to make decisions. When redistricting raises these opportunity costs, citizens may choose to not participate as an alternative to pursuing new, costly information about their "new" representative. In the early 2000s, elections following redistricting experienced a decline in turnout in portions of states that were redrawn (Hayes & McKee, 2009). Redistricting exists to ensure fairness and equality by ensuring that everyone's vote is worth relatively the same amount. Despite these intentions, redistricting may actually cause some detrimental effects to the mass public. Aside from those discussed in this section is the pervasive problem of gerrymandering.

Gerrymandering and Its Outcomes

Gerrymandering, broadly defined, is the “practice of deliberately and unfairly manipulating district lines to favor one party over others,” (McGhee, 2020). The practice has become firmly ingrained in the United States political process since at least the 1800s, with both major political parties engaging in the practice (Abramowitz, 1983; Yoshinaka & Murphy, 2011). Gerrymandering typically occurs when state legislatures, who control the ability to redraw the district maps in most states, utilize this power to gain an advantage in future elections. For example, in North Carolina, Republicans have been challenged in the courts multiple times for district maps that disadvantaged both minority voters and Democrats. This becomes a significant issue when votes are wasted and communities are divided (McGhee, 2020). For example, the entirety of Salt Lake City, Utah has been split into four separate districts, diluting the influence of any voter living there.

In the last two decades, the topic of partisan redistricting has ballooned in popularity, sometimes escaping from the academic world into the public sphere (McCarty et al., 2011; McGhee, 2020). Despite several recent Supreme Court cases seeking to impose restrictions on the practice, and even end it altogether, gerrymandering remains a fundamental part of the political process. While partisan redistricting might in theory be intended to actually reinforce political equality, it can result in normatively “bad” outcomes (Stephanopoulos & McGhee, 2015; Yoshinaka & Murphy, 2011). By drawing districts in a way that is politically advantageous to one group, others may find their community literally divided (Yoshinaka & Murphy, 2011), their votes effectively “wasted” (Stephanopoulos & McGhee, 2015), and with representation that does not, and perhaps will not, reflect their views.

Despite the original intentions of redistricting, scholars have often criticized the practice of gerrymandering as harmful to a democratic society (Engstrom, 2013; Kang, 2007). A chief problem with the practice of partisan redistricting is that it often results in “wasted votes,” which means that large numbers of votes cast in a particular district are, in effect, cancelled out (Stephanopoulos & McGhee, 2015). The difference between each respective party’s wasted votes is called the efficiency gap (Stephanopoulos & McGhee, 2015). This measure communicates how politically lop-sided a district is. While some measurements of the efficiency gap make changes to the original formula (Chamber et al., 2017; Nagle 2015), scholars generally conclude there is a substantial amount of partisan bias and “inefficiency” in congressional districts and that congressional districts have become more and more inefficient since the practice took off 60 years ago.

Further, scholars struggle to balance electoral competitiveness with electoral stability. It is essential to any democratic society that citizens possess clear and direct linkages to their elected representatives. However, these linkages are difficult to maintain when voters are shuffled through ever-changing electoral districts (Yoshinaka & Murphy, 2011). For example, consider the fairly recent issues with North Carolina’s district maps. Republicans in North Carolina have found themselves in court for much of the last decade trying to defend gerrymandering district maps. Throughout this legal battle, voters have found themselves shuffled from district to district, dividing communities. Inter-election stability, then, seems a normatively desirable benchmark for “good” representation. For example, in Pennsylvania in 2012, Democrats won 51% of the popular House vote statewide; however, they only claimed 5 of the 18 seats, largely due to gerrymandering. Further, partisan dislocation, splitting geographically clustered co-partisans among several districts, reduces representation and increases wasted votes (DeFord, et al., 2022). All of these effects seem to influence the “weight” of individual votes in one way or another. Whether it is by creating uncompetitive districts, unrepresentative communities, or increasing costs of access to representation, the outcomes of gerrymandering run counter to political equality, equal access, and “one voice, one vote.”

Public Opinion on Gerrymandering

When the Supreme Court of the United States took up the redistricting question in the 1960s, public opinion was overwhelmingly favorable towards redistricting (Fougere et al., 2010). Much of the public was supportive of the Court’s attempt to protect the “one voice, one vote” doctrine. This support for abstract equality seems to have persisted, since a large majority still support the redistricting process “based on population equality” (Fougere et al., 2010; Ansolabehere & Persily, 2016). However, beyond this initial polling, scholars know frighteningly little about public attitudes towards the mechanisms of redistricting or the notion of gerrymandering itself.

Public opinion relative to gerrymandering is difficult to tackle, since only about 50% of the public is even aware of how congressional districts are drawn. In fact, very few published works have tackled the question. Among those individuals who do provide substantive responses to surveys about redistricting, there are some common and interesting differences. For example, white respondents are more likely than racially minoritized respondents to say that redistricting is done fairly (Fougere et al., 2010; Pew, 2022). Differences across other socio-demographic variables are not significant.

One factor that does inform much of our understanding about public opinion on redistricting is partisanship. Across both parties, Republicans are more likely to think that their state process for redistricting is fair than are Democrats (Fougere et al., 2010; CCES 31). Further, Republicans are more likely to prefer that a legislative body draw the districts, while Democrats and Independents are more likely to prefer an independent commission system. Finally, partisan opinions relative to redistricting

heavily depend on electoral outcomes. Electoral losses have a direct impact on opinion, with those in the losing party, or those who are the victims of gerrymandering, being more likely to say that the process is unfair (Fougere et al., 2010).

Overall, we have a limited understanding about what the general public thinks about the mechanistic values involved in redistricting. While we know that the most partisan individuals can have substantive attitudes, those attitudes appear contextual and subject to change. Crucially, we are missing a study of how intuitions of fairness, a key democratic value, may shape these attitudes about gerrymandering. Gerrymandering, engineering congressional districting, is inherently a violation of the norm of political equality and fairness, and those norms must exist, and be reinforced, for democracy to sustain itself.

Democratic Norms and Political Equality

Norms are “shared understanding that reflect some shared social purpose” (Payne, 2021). Norms govern both interpersonal (Bicchieri, 2016) and procedural (Lawrence, 1976) behaviors in democratic cultures. For example, the expectation that politicians should engage in civil discourse is a norm, as is the expectation that each person’s vote is weighed in equal measure. Norms are not self-sustaining, however, and must be maintained through relational and consistent enforcement. Commonly, the primary mechanism for norm maintenance is the threat of a sanction post-norm violation (Elster, 2011; Graham & Svulik, 2020). In other words, people tend to uphold norms when there is some penalty for not abiding by them

In this project, we are primarily interested in the political norms underpinning democratic governance and the processes by which votes are translated into seats (i.e. representation). Perhaps the most basic norm that guides elections involves equality and, by extension, fairness. Political equality maintains that in order for proper democracy to exist, the political process and its mechanisms (i.e. elections) must be kept neutral, free, and fair (Dahl, 2007). The tenants of political equality are easy to identify. All citizens should have an equal say in the conduct of public business and should have the same opportunity to access political resources and processes (Verba, 2001). The government should not restrict or prohibit citizens from accessing politics, nor should the government place an undue burden on the same (Saunders, 2010). What renders these behaviors normative under the umbrella of political equality is that governments and officials may face punishment for undertaking measures that endanger political equality (Elster, 2011). Further, there are, in many cases, codified provisions that uphold some aspect of equality. Supreme Court precedent and civil rights legislation prohibits discrimination on the bases of protected class, although, admittedly, enforcement of these measures is sometimes questionable (Tolson, 2014). Regardless, equality remains a normatively desirable behavior for democracies.

One might argue that political equality is not a norm in the case of the United States, given that the 13th, 14th, 15th, and 19th amendments were required to upend an unequal status quo. The U.S. has a troubling relationship with equality. While the founding documents espouse the idea that everyone possesses inalienable rights (McConnell 1984), the country maintained a formalized, and codified, institution of discrimination for nearly one-hundred years (Wacquant, 2007). Slavery flies directly in the face of the equality the country sought to achieve. Even after the institution of slavery itself fell after the Civil War, racism and discrimination relative to political access and participation persisted until the Civil Rights movement, and, in some cases, until today (Newman, 2004). Similarly, until the 19th amendment, women, who now make up slightly more than 50% of the U.S. population, were prohibited from voting. The reconstruction amendments, the civil rights legislation, the 19th amendment, and the Defense of Marriage Act (2023), among others, were meant to remove restrictions, ameliorate pervasive inequalities, and re-strengthen the norm of political equality. However, such legal provisions are fallible, sometimes contested, and left up to subjective interpretation and enforcement (Klein, 2007). Challenges to gerrymandering, too, are subjectively interpreted and enforced by the courts, which has, in many cases, refused to hear the argument altogether (Gentithes, 2019).

Redistricting, in many cases, does not achieve procedural protections for voters either. Twice in the last ten years North Carolina legislators have been accused of engineering their electoral maps based on race and partisanship, effectively disenfranchising members of opposing groups (Herschlag et al., 2020). Similarly, there are significant concerns over “wasted votes” and unequal popular vote to seats gained ratios (Stephanopoulos & McGhee, 2015). Akin to voting discrimination based on personal attributes, gerrymandering may discriminate based on where one lives. Gerrymandering results in an unequal distribution of resources, which runs counter to expectations about equality and fairness.

Despite an interest in norm-breaking, political science literature rarely frames gerrymandering as such. It remains unclear, then, how citizens may react to normative information about anti-democratic political processes, which in this case, have become a norm themselves. How do citizens think about the process of redistricting, and do they connect it to a violation of fairness as a norm in politics?

A Theory of Conflicting Norms

Do citizens view gerrymandering as “normative?” We begin by acknowledging that individuals do routinely express rigorous and robust support for democratic principles in the abstract (Wolak, 2020; Nicholson, 2011; Graham & Svulik, 2020). Individuals are taught from an early age that there are certain “rules” by which the game is played. These rules are meant to ensure that

the “game,” in this case politics, is conducted fairly and that the playing field itself does not inappropriately advantage one team over another (Sears, 1971; Wolak, 2020). Finally, players can expect that rule violations will be met with some negative consequences (Davis et al., 2022).

Gerrymandering essentially represents a violation of the spirit of the game of politics; wherein elected politicians can choose who their voters are. However, due to its entrenched place in the political process, it is possible that many individuals view partisan redistricting as another “rule” rather than a violation of fairness or equality norms. What becomes important, then, is the *framing* we use to describe the act of gerrymandering itself.

We know that providing positive or negative normative frames can affect the ways in which individuals process information, and these frames can cause significant changes in attitude and outlook (Payne, 2021; Moon et al., 2015). When presented with positive normative information meant to evoke some sense of the norm in question, individuals adjust behaviors to be more in line with the norm, even more than when presented with negatively worded normative frames (Moon et al., 2015). For this reason, we theorize that the presence of normative frames depicting gerrymandering as unfair and undemocratic will increase support for fairness norms (the broad social concept underlying inequality) and therefore reduce support for gerrymandering.

H1A: Individuals will be more likely to support fairness norms when given normative information about gerrymandering.

H1B: Individuals will be less likely to support a gerrymandered outcome when given normative information about gerrymandering.

One solution to gerrymandering over the last several years involves Independent Districting Commissions (IDCs). IDCs represent a compromise of sorts. Rather than vesting the power to draw congressional districts in the legislature, which presumably can switch from party to party, some states have delegated that power to an independent committee (Gartner, 2019). States with IDCs often require the commissions to be non-partisan or at least to be balanced by partisanship. IDCs are presumably the “fairest” method of redistricting in that they theoretically remove the incentive to redistrict with partisan considerations in mind, and because both “sides” must give up something (Wolak, 2020). We expect that normative framing relative to gerrymandering will increase support for IDCs among subjects.

H1C: Individuals will be more likely to support Independent Districting Commissions when given normative information about gerrymandering.

However, there is the chance that the above relationship could work in reverse. We know that appealing to the spirit of democracy can stir strong feelings in respondents (Cagle & Davis, 2022; Simonovits et al., 2022). For example, much of the GOP discourse surrounding the 2020 Presidential election concerned “saving democracy.” This is, in effect, a normative frame, depicting the election results as illegitimate, while at the same time legitimizing efforts to overturn it. The same process might occur relative to framing of gerrymandering if it is framed as being “beneficial” to democracy or as needed to maintain it. Further, subjects might be even more willing to sacrifice fairness for power if their party is in danger of losing said power but can save it with gerrymandering.

H2A: Individuals will be less likely to support fairness norms when presented with a saving democracy frame.

H2B: Individuals will be more likely to support a gerrymandered outcome when presented with a saving democracy frame.

H2C: Individuals will be less likely to support Independent Districting Commissions when presented with a saving democracy frame.

Finally, given the propensity of individuals to coalesce around political group membership, we might expect differences relative to partisanship. Under the most minimal of conditions, individuals strongly adhere to their group memberships and evaluate in-group members and out-group members much differently (Tajfel, 1981). Partisanship functions now as a critical part of a person’s identity, and preserving the status of that identity is paramount (Kingzette et al., 2021). Individuals will even endorse wrongdoing when the in-party is accused of it, and then condemn the out-party for the same offenses. Because of this, individuals might pay lip-service to fairness norms in the abstract but express support for gerrymandering when threatened with real political stakes.

H1C: Individuals will be less likely to support fairness norms when presented with a partisan cue.

H2C: Individuals will be more likely to support a gerrymandered outcome when presented with a partisan cue.

H3C: Individuals will be less likely to support Independent Districting Commissions when presented with a partisan cue.

Experimental Design

To test the hypotheses outlined above, we developed a survey experiment that accomplishes two things. First, we test whether normative framing and/or partisan considerations affect both support for abstract fairness norms and direct support for unfair outcomes. Second, we account for whether these attitudes differ across partisanship.

Sample

Between December 2022 and January 2023, we collected data from 1,034 subjects from the Bovitz/ForthRight Access survey firm. Much like other in-house survey firms, Bovitz/ForthRight Access recruits respondents through both random digit dialing

and the Internet through various commercial solicitations. Respondents who agree to participate are then offered compensation for completing surveys over some period of time. Our sample includes partisans and Independent leaners only; true independents were excluded from the survey altogether, since we are only interested in partisan differences. The sample consisted of a relatively equal numbers of partisan, with approximately 51% Democrats and 49% Republicans, as well as nearly even numbers of men and women. The sample was 79% white, with an average age of 44, and a modal educational attainment of a college degree.

Table 1 – Sample Breakdown

		Study 1
<i>Age</i>		43
<i>Gender</i>	Male	46%
	Female	54%
<i>Partisanship</i>	Democrats	52%
	Republicans	48%
<i>Ideology</i>	Liberals	504
	Conservatives	502
<i>Race</i>	White	79%
	Black	7%
	Other	14%
<i>Average Schooling</i>	Education	4.4%
<i>Frequency of media use</i>	News use	3.73
Total sample		1006

Design

The subjects were block-randomized into one of four treatment groups. The experimental matrix consists of an incremental design wherein each group builds upon the information presented to the preceding group. All subjects in the treatment condition(s) read a brief vignette based on a press release about a state redistricting process. Across all conditions, individuals only view stories about in-party redistricting plans being challenged by the out-party. Numerous works have shown that individuals are incredibly punitive to the out-party for even the most minor offenses (Graham & Svobik, 2020), and out-party hostility may even increase in defense of in-party bad acts (Rothschild, et al. 2020). Quite simply, partisans would throw the book at out-party gerrymandering. Further, agreeing to engage in fairness necessarily involves giving up some advantage one might retain by not playing fair. This consideration should be more pronounced in the in-party, where one's commitment to fairness would have to override partisanship. All subjects received the treatment base, which reads as follows, where the only difference is the party affiliation cue:

The Republican/Democratic party has released its new plan for the redrawing of Congressional Districts within the state. The new plan keeps the same number of previous districts; however, the layout of those districts will change significantly. The Republican/Democratic plan would effectively ensure that a majority of representatives elected to Congress from the state will be from the Republican/Democratic party by spreading Republican/Democratic voters out across all of the districts, and

therefore reducing their influence, rather than grouping them by geographical location or drawing geographically congruent districts.

Then, subjects in the “normative info” condition read the following additional text:

Political parties sometimes draw congressional districts in states in such a way that ensures they maintain a political or electoral advantage. This practice is called “Gerrymandering.” Gerrymandering seems to run directly counter to the democratic notion that everyone’s vote should be given equal weight.

In contrast to the “normative info” group, the “cue” group read the following snippet after reading the treatment base:

The Republican/Democratic party argues that their new redistricting plan is critical to ensuring that their plans remain intact. Without this gerrymander, Democrats/Republicans would be able to undo the progress that Republicans/Democrats have made.

Finally, the last treatment group read the full instrument, where the previous conditions were combined into a single news story:

The Republican/Democratic party has released its new plan for the redrawing of Congressional Districts within the state. The new plan keeps the same number of previous districts; however, the layout of those districts will change significantly. The Republican/Democratic plan would effectively ensure that a majority of representatives elected to Congress from the state will be from the Republican/Democratic party by spreading Republican/Democratic voters out across all of the districts, and therefore reducing their influence, rather than grouping them by geographical location or drawing geographically congruent districts.

Political parties sometimes draw congressional districts in states in such a way that ensures they maintain a political or electoral advantage. This practice is called “Gerrymandering.” Gerrymandering seems to run directly counter to the democratic notion that everyone’s vote should be given equal weight.

The Republican/Democratic party argues that their new redistricting plan is critical to ensuring that their plans remain intact. Without this gerrymander, Democrats/Republicans would be able to undo the progress that Republicans/Democrats have made.

Subjects then completed the post-treatment portion of the survey and were debriefed regarding their experience. The debriefing included an explanation of the purpose of the experiment and instructions for respondents to follow-up with questions if necessary.

This design is intended to reveal how the addition of normative information, partisan consideration, or both affect citizen attitudes relative to fairness, gerrymandering, and maintaining power. The incremental design is most appropriate (as opposed to a factorial design) because we are interested in changes among the in-party from treatment group to treatment group, not necessarily within groups.

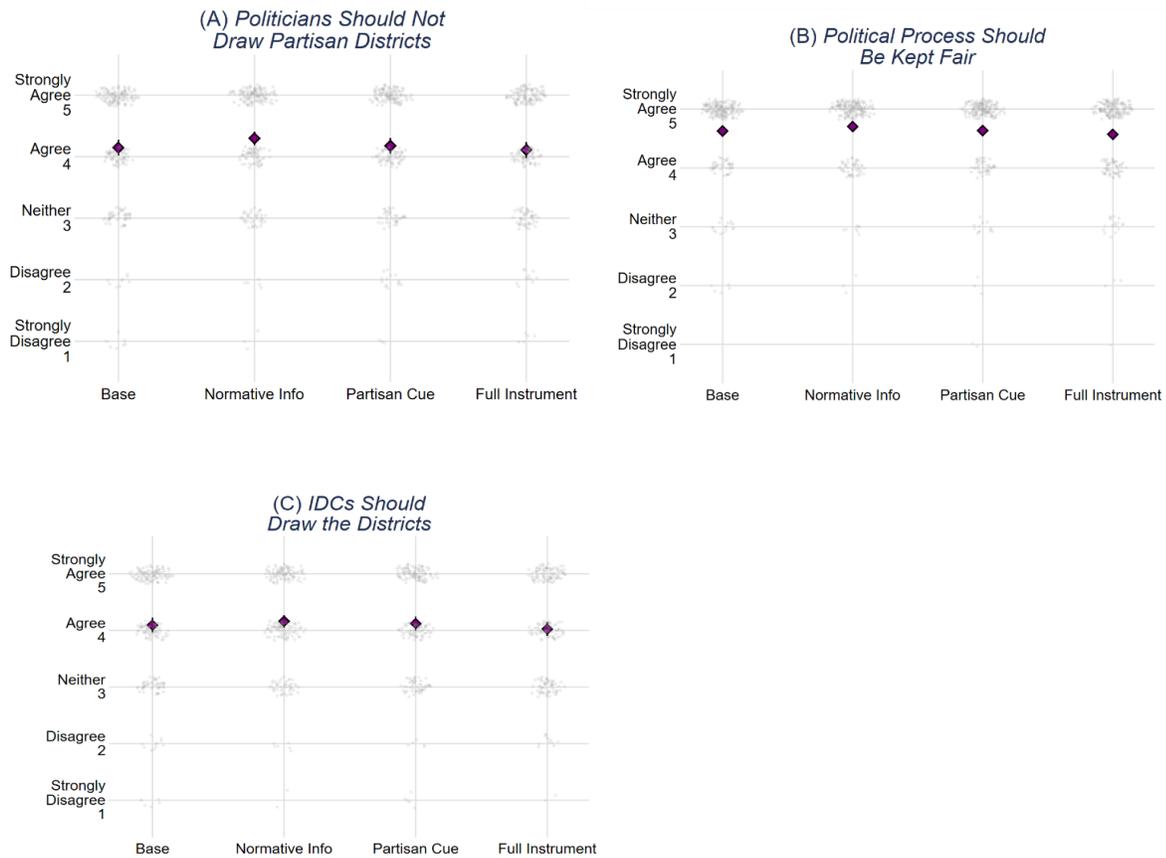
Measures

We collected responses to multiple questions in the post-treatment section of the survey. Two instruments measured agreement with *fairness norms*. Subjects were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: (1) “Politicians should not draw partisan districts to advantage one party over another,” and (2) “It is important to keep the political process fair and neutral.” In addition, we also asked subjects about their attitudes toward *Independent Districting Commissions (IDCs)*; subjects reported whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “Independent districting commissions are made up of a balance of members from both parties and include independents. The measure of support for IDCs is intended to measure an individual’s willingness to forgo some in-party control over redistricting outcomes. IDCs inherently weaken *both* parties by taking the power away from the legislature. Having such groups draw electoral district lines would be better than allowing the majority party to draw districts.” Finally, we asked respondents to report attitudes relative to competing interests between democracy and in-party advantage. We asked subjects to report whether they agree or disagree with the following statement: “In this situation, it is more important for the Republican/Democratic (in-party) to maintain congressional control than it is to draw fair districts.” All responses to these statements involved a five category Likert scale that was coded to range from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5).

Results

We begin by breaking down support for fairness among subjects by the condition to which they were assigned. Figure 1 illustrates support for a fair political process, support for non-partisan redistricting, and support for a system of independent redistricting commissions (Panels A-C). Support remains high for these outcomes regardless of the treatment condition. In only one instance – involving the statement that politicians should not draw partisan districts – does the normative information and democratic framing about gerrymandering increase fairness support, and it is a negligible increase at that. Interestingly, while general support for fairness remains high, it seems that support for a fair political process is slightly higher than support for neutral redistricting practices, highlighting possible ambiguity or disagreement in how to operationalize fairness in politics.

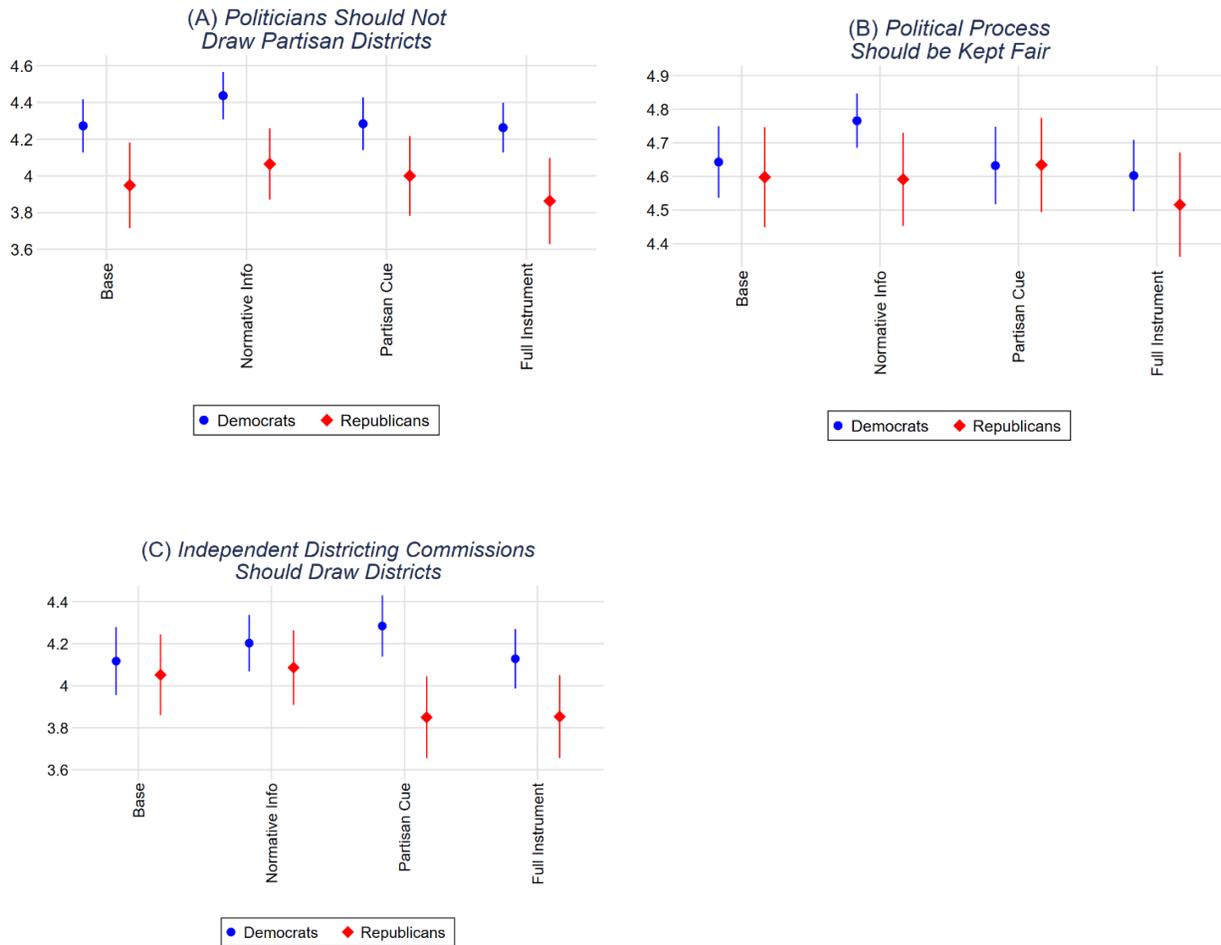
Figure 1. Post-treatment outcomes



Note. The images display the distribution of responses to evaluations of fairness conditional upon to which treatment group the subject was assigned. Distribution of subject responses appear in gray and have been lightly jittered; diamond point estimates represent mean response for a given condition.

Given the obvious importance of partisanship on evaluating information about politics, the initial pooled comparisons may obscure significant differences among partisans across conditions. To examine how partisan identification and differences across ideologies play in attitudes towards fairness and gerrymandering, we break the treatment groups down by party ID in Figure 2. Most responses cluster above the mean (neutral) value, indicating that there is relatively high support for fairness even in these treatments; however, there is some movement among and between partisans. Beginning with panel A, Democrats seem slightly more supportive of non-partisan redistricting than Republicans, particularly when supplied with the normative information explaining how gerrymandering runs counter to democratic ideals and desired outcomes. This difference disappears in panel B, where there are no significant differences between partisans on political process fairness across conditions. Finally, in panel C, we see that support for Independent Redistricting Commissions remains somewhat high and stable, except in the condition where respondents were told that their party would lose power without gerrymandering. In that instance, Republican support for IDCs dropped significantly, while Democrat support for the measure remained high. These findings further highlight the differences between symbolic support for democracy and operational belief enforcement.

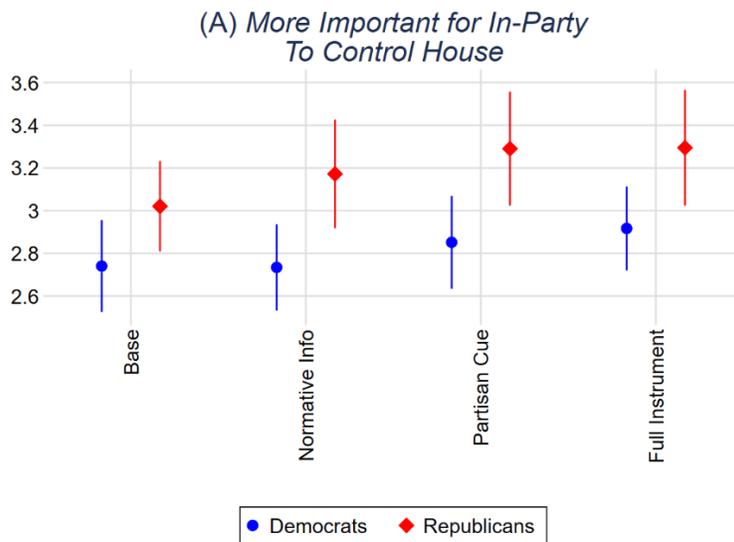
Figure 2. Perceptions of fairness norms, conditional upon informational framing and cues



Notes: Point estimates convey group means for Democrats and Republicans on support for fairness in the political process and redistricting specifically. Point estimates are bracketed by 95% confidence intervals.

Finally, we examine to what degree individuals are willing to forgo democratic norms in favor of some real partisan gain. Figure 3 displays the results for agreement with the statement: “In this instance, it is more important for the Republican/Democratic party to remain in power than it is to ensure a fair redistricting process.” Across partisans, we see that both groups are much less supportive of maintaining power through unfair means than they are supportive of fairness principle. However, we see moderate differences between Republicans and Democrats. Republicans seem slightly more willing to express a willingness to maintain power despite the fairness concerns. However, these differences are modest at best, though most pronounced when presented with the partisan cue framing device. This seems to suggest that Republicans are more prone to unfair practices to maintain power, and possibly, to eschewing democratic norms in favor of realized political gains.

This seems to mirror external events wherein the Democratic party itself seems to have internal disagreements on whether or to what degree to engage in gerrymandering behavior. Democrats have in recent memory seemed indecisive when choosing how to draw congressional districts in both California and New York. Similarly, they decry Republican attempts to gerrymander in the South and Midwest. However, Republican elites seem to have reached some consensus that partisan redistricting is simply the way the “game” is played, and indeed, they enjoy more success with the process than others.



Notes: Point estimates convey group means for Democrats and Republicans on support for maintaining power through gerrymandering. Point estimates are bracketed by 95% confidence intervals.

Discussion and Conclusion

In democracies, fairness and equality is often codified in founding documents, such as the U.S. Constitution. However, the *interpretation* of those documents involves the intuitions of ordinary people who have material and symbolic stakes. For example, in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court of the United States interpreted the constitution to permit racial discrimination and established the “separate but equal” doctrine (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896)). This, of course, is violative of equality and rather obvious to us now; however, interpretation can disrupt normative objectives.

In some sense, fairness values are often tenuously sustained by collaborative public consensus, which can fall apart in the fight for power. For example, politicians’ willingness to compromise has cratered (Wolak, 2020), as has the public’s affect toward their neighbors (Iyengar et al., 2019; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016). The inclusion of some material stake, i.e. politics, has eroded and continues to erode our democratic foundations (Clayton et al., 2021). When elites behave in ways that violate expectations about fairness, voters have the opportunity to sanction those elites by voting them out of office. Political party institutions, similarly, have formal punishment mechanisms that can be used to discourage enterprising elites. For example, Congress can—and in some circumstances, *has*—, formally censured a member for untoward remarks or other misbehavior. Recently, Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) was stripped of her committee assignments following some incendiary comments about her political opponents.

However, gerrymandering presents an interesting application of fairness norms. Partisan redistricting, while resulting in both normatively and practically undemocratic outcomes, has become firmly ingrained in the American political process (Stephanopoulos & McGhee, 2015). Gerrymandering is how the proverbial sausage is made. While individuals express robust support for the notions of democracy and fairness, there are discrepancies in how and when partisans choose to operationalize that support in light of gerrymandering. We see these discrepancies manifest in individuals expressing willingness to forgo neutral redistricting processes in favor of maintaining, or even upsetting, the status quo. We see here a sticky principle-implementation gap. Akin to how white Americans “support” equality but reject interventions meant to achieve it (Dixon et al., 2017), partisans seem to express robust support for norms while simultaneously supporting their erosion.

Gerrymandering is often not framed as norm-breaking or anti-democratic. Rather, both political parties engage in the process, although there are some significant internal differences in how their supporters evaluate it. Despite higher levels of democratic support for fairness and neutral redistricting, political gerrymandering is typically depicted as a normal part of politics. Even the U.S. Supreme Court has largely declined to pursue cases related to gerrymandering, instead resolving to stay out of such “political questions.” Perhaps the way we counter counter-normative behaviors, like gerrymandering, shapes citizens attitudes toward fairness intuitions. In this paper, we showed that there is relatively high, rigorous support for political equality and fairness norms in American politics. However, Democrats seem to exhibit higher levels of this support than do Republicans. Providing normative information depicting gerrymandering as undemocratic further widened this gap between the parties, highlighting that Democrats might be somewhat more responsive to normative concerns than are Republicans. Republicans, on the other hand, responded much more aggressively to partisan cues relative to support for fairness and IDCs

than did Democrats, showing that Republicans might be more concerned with partisan realizations than are Democrats. Further, when provided with the choice between expressing support for neutral redistricting and accepting the possibility of the loss of political power, Republicans were more likely to support maintaining power even if that meant resorting to gerrymandering.

This partisan asymmetry in support for political fairness is troubling. Normatively speaking, if one side of the political spectrum is less supportive of political fairness than the other, then both the long-term legitimacy and stability of the government system should be called into question. Operationally, providing normative information about undemocratic practices seems to only widen the gap between the parties, rather than reduce it. Partisan cues, too, seem to prompt Republicans to express higher support for maintaining power than Democrats. These findings highlight significant differences in how the parties perceive the norms which ostensibly guide their conduct and call into question the processes by which we strive to uphold these norms.

Moving forward, future works exploring partisan support for democracy should take care to avoid one off questions about democratic support and should instead turn to operational questions of specific democratic ideas, where there seems to be much more variation in attitudes. For example, while citizens express robust support for democracy, Bright Line Watch has recorded partisan disparities in support for polling places and electoral concessions (2022). However, even these operational mechanisms are problematic without additional context and are not easily manipulated in internet survey experiments. Such evaluations that bring the concept of “democracy” out of the abstract and make it concrete may be “better” than other measures of democratic support. Further, it is possible that in this specific case, respondents view gerrymandering as “fair,” due to its long history in the political process. Maybe the public views some normatively anti-democratic behavior like gerrymandering, incivility, voting restrictions as part and parcel of politics because they have been socialized by those very acts and their new “normalcy” in American politics.

Declarations

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Getting Off the Roller Coaster: Reflections on the 2024 Elections

Jamie L. Carson¹ and Stewart Ulrich²

¹UGA Athletic Association Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Georgia, carson@uga.edu

²Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Sam Houston State University

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the context of the 2024 U.S. elections, analyzing key factors that shaped voter behavior and partisan outcomes in both the presidential and congressional elections. We begin by documenting many of the key events from the unexpected presidential campaign including President Biden's historic decision to drop out of the race following his disastrous debate performance in late June. From there, we highlight how Kamala Harris's transition as the presumptive and then the eventual nominee shaped the race against former President Trump during the next few months. We also examine key events from the 2024 congressional primary elections and how those ultimately affected the general elections for both the U.S. House and Senate. Ultimately, this paper offers insight into how the unique landscape of the 2024 election may impact policy, governance, and future partisan competition in the United States.

Introduction

The 2024 elections stood out as highly unusual in modern political history. Initially, they appeared poised to feature the first presidential rematch since 1956, when Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson challenged President Dwight D. Eisenhower a second time. Despite widespread public dissatisfaction with the prospect of a Biden-Trump rematch, both parties initially seemed determined to proceed with these candidates.¹ However, the dynamic shifted dramatically in the summer of 2024. A poor debate performance by President Biden in late June amplified growing concerns about his age and capacity to lead. Over the next three weeks, increasing pressure from Democratic leaders eventually led Biden to step aside. By mid-July, he announced his decision to withdraw from the race and endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris as the Democratic nominee. This decision meant Biden was the first president since Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968 to decline a reelection bid. Harris's elevation to the top of the ticket injected new energy and unpredictability into the campaign, reshaping the trajectory of the election in the months that followed.

This paper seeks to contextualize the events of the 2024 presidential and congressional elections within a broader historical framework. It begins by examining the pivotal moments of the presidential race, focusing on the key developments that defined this unprecedented contest between two widely unpopular individuals. Following this, it briefly explores the congressional elections, analyzing trends that influenced partisan control of both the House and Senate. Finally, the paper considers the implications of the election outcomes for the new president and their allies in Congress, discussing the potential for meaningful political and policy shifts in the wake of these transformative events.

Presidential Primaries: Trump and Biden Clinch their Respective Nominations

After ultimately losing the 2020 presidential election (despite protests to the contrary)² and leaving the White House instead of serving a second term, Donald Trump returned to his Florida enclave and remained a dominant influence in Republican politics. He loomed large over the 2022 midterm elections, actively endorsing candidates and trying to maintain his position as a kingmaker in the party. As the political world turned its attention to the 2024 presidential primary contest, it was no surprise that Trump chose to run again. In the aftermath of the 2022 midterm election where his candidates did not do as well as expected and Republicans gained fewer seats in Congress than predicted (Carson and Jacobson 2024; Carson and Ulrich 2024), Trump announced on November 15, 2022 that he was seeking the 2024 Republican presidential nomination.³ Despite his persistent influence in the party, many other candidates also declared their intention to seek the nomination, including his former vice president Mike Pence, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, and former UN ambassador Nikki Haley.

¹Seung Min Kim and Linley Sanders, "'Uniquely Horrible Choice': Few US Adults want a Biden-Trump Rematch in 2024, an AP-NORC Poll Shows," The Associated Press, December 14, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/biden-trump-2024-campaign-democrats-republicans-440088966619e68dbf89f745788bb372>

²Reuters, "Fact Check: Courts Have Dismissed Multiple Lawsuits of Alleged Electoral Fraud Presented by Trump Campaign," February 15, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/fact-check-courts-have-dismissed-multiple-lawsuits-of-alleged-electoral-fraud-p-idUSKBN2AF1FQ/>

³Domenico Montanaro, "With Midterm Losses, Trump's Climb to the Presidency Could be Steeper than He'd Like," NPR, November 15, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/15/1044234232/trump-announces-run-president-2024>

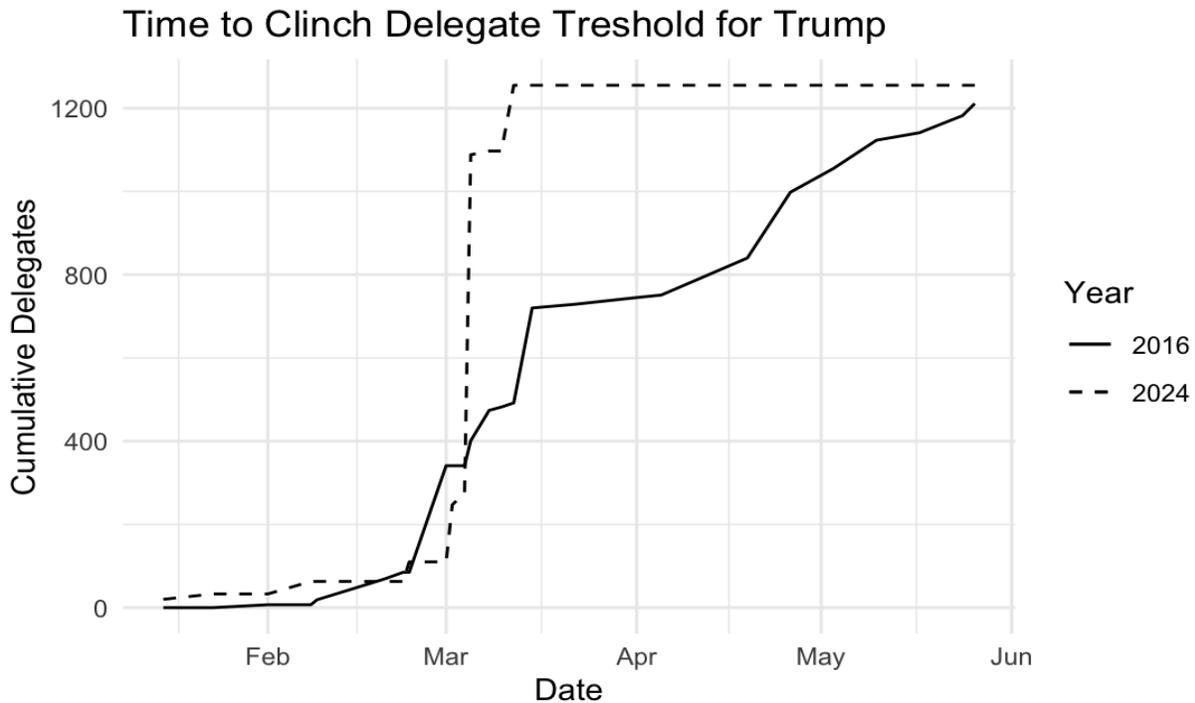


Figure 1. Time for Trump to Clinch Delegate Threshold during the Presidential Primaries (Source: The Associated Press)

Table 1. Number of Days Required for Trump to Win Delegate Threshold in Primaries (Source: The AP)

Year	Days
2016	115
2024	57

Yet these challengers ultimately could not hold off Trump’s nomination. In the end, Trump won all but two statewide contests. Nikki Haley won the Washington, D.C. and Vermont primaries, and she ended her campaign with less than 100 delegates. Haley was the final Republican challenger to drop out of the race and did so on March 6, 2024.⁴ Trump was able to clinch the delegate threshold at a much quicker rate than he did in 2016, when he had more challengers who stayed in the race longer, as displayed in Figure 1. The total number of days can be seen in Table 1, illustrating how it took Trump less than half the time it did in 2016, as a function of his complete takeover of the party. Though he had some challengers for the 2024 nomination, they did not pose much of an obstacle in the end.

President Biden faced even less opposition to his party’s nomination, as is the trend for an incumbent president (Kamarck 2009), and faced no credible challenger among potential Democrats. The only active challenger was a largely unknown congressman Dean Phillips of Minnesota. He dropped out in March 2024 and endorsed Biden after failing to secure a single victory in the presidential primaries.⁵ Despite some initial concerns about Biden’s age during the primary (he turned 81 in November 2023), Biden continued with his initial plan to run for reelection, indicating he was ready to take on former President Trump in the upcoming election.

Biden’s 2024 State of the Union

The 2024 State of the Union address, an annual tradition for presidents, came during an election year when there were many concerns about President Biden’s age and ability to serve for another full term. When he took to the lectern in front of a joint session of Congress on March 7, there were many doubts, as he had done few live addresses with such a large audience. During

⁴Steve Peoples and Meg Kinnard, “Nikki Haley Suspends her Campaign and Leaves Donald Trump as the Last Major Republican Candidate,” Associated Press, March 6, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/nikki-haley-republican-trump-super-tuesday-losses-95ab56b68a8eeffbf04ef90f2f00ef29>
⁵Rebecca Shabad and Nnamdi Egwuonwu, “Dean Phillips Ends Presidential Campaign and Endorses Biden,” NBC News, March 6, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/dean-phillips-ends-presidential-campaign-rcna142091>

the speech, he was what one headline described as “defiant”⁶ in his address, repeatedly attacking his predecessor Trump. He strongly defended Ukraine in its war with Russia and promised to build a pier in the Mediterranean Sea near Gaza to help deliver aid to the besieged region. His ability to deliver such a high-powered speech left many Democrats relieved about his capacity to run for reelection and assuaged many fears about running an 80-year-old candidate.

Trump’s Legal Challenges

Going into the 2024 election year, Donald Trump’s legal cases were one of the largest potential barriers to his success in the presidential campaign. In the aftermath of the events surrounding the January 6th, 2021 siege of the U.S. Capitol at the end of his first term (Jacobson 2024), Trump found himself in legal jeopardy in four separate cases: a hush-money case involving payouts to a former porn star in New York, an election interference case in Georgia, a classified documents case in Florida, and a January 6th election case in the nation’s capital. Each of these cases had the potential to cause major electoral problems for Trump, yet each unfolded in its own way.

For the New York case, Trump was charged with 34 felony counts for violating campaign finance rules when he paid Stormy Daniels to keep quiet about an alleged affair they had in the past.⁷ The payment was made during the 2016 run for president, and prosecutors argued it was executed to prevent the public from learning about the affair. After a weeklong trial, Trump was found guilty on all 34 counts by a jury in New York on May 30, 2024, making him the first former president ever to be convicted of a crime.⁸ This caused many to wonder how this would affect the presidential race, as the Biden campaign referred to their opponent as a criminal and convicted felon.⁹ One benefit for the Trump campaign was a fundraising bump: his campaign raised \$141 million during the month of May when he was convicted.¹⁰ Trump was scheduled to be sentenced in September, but the judge in the case later delayed the sentencing until November 26, which was notable as it was after the presidential election.¹¹

The next case that potentially influenced the race was the classified documents case in Florida. Trump was indicted in June 2023 for taking classified documents with him to his Mar-a-Lago estate after leaving the White House in January 2021.¹² A special counsel, Jack Smith, was named to handle this indictment and prosecution. As it involved classified material, the case was slower than some of the others as the government needed to carefully build their case and protect such material. Finally, in what was stunning to many observers and certainly a gift to Trump on the eve of the Republican National Convention, the judge in the case, Aileen Cannon, abruptly dismissed all charges in July 2024. She ruled that the special counsel’s appointment violated the Constitution and ultimately dismissed the case.¹³ Smith said he would appeal the case, meaning its fate was uncertain prior to the election.¹⁴ For his presidential campaign, it only helped Trump as allies cheered the dismissal as a vindication of Trump’s persecution.¹⁵

The Georgia case did not get off the ground as quickly as some of the other cases. Trump was charged alongside 18 other allies in meddling in the 2020 election in Georgia, and Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis used a racketeering statute normally reserved for mobsters to charge them in August 2023.¹⁶ The case hit a snag when one of the defendants alleged that Willis should not have handled the case due to her romantic relationship with another lawyer she hired to help with the case. After hearings were held on the nature of the relationship and whether it constituted a conflict of interest, the presiding judge ruled that Willis could remain on the case if the other lawyer left the team. However, the judge allowed Trump’s legal team to appeal the ruling, leaving the case in limbo until after the election.¹⁷

⁶Melissa Quinn, Kaia Hubbard, and Caroline Linton, “In Defiant 2024 State of the Union, Biden Fires Opening Salvo in Likely Rematch with Trump,” CBS News, March 8, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/biden-state-of-the-union-address-2024/>

⁷Michael R. Sisak, Eric Tucker, Jennifer Petlz, and Will Weissert, “Trump Charged with 34 Felony Counts in Hush Money Scheme,” The Associated Press, April 4, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-arraignment-hush-money-81225510ef7638494852816878f612f0>

⁸Lazaro Gamio, Karen Yourish, Matthew Haag, Jonah E. Bromwich, Maggie Haberman, and K.K. Rebecca Lai, “The Trump Manhattan Criminal Verdict, Count by Count,” The New York Times, May 30, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/05/30/nyregion/trump-hush-money-verdict.html>

⁹Reid J. Epstein, “Biden Campaign Ad Calls Attention to Trump’s Felon Status,” The New York Times, June 17, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/17/us/politics/trump-felon-biden-ad.html>

¹⁰Jill Colvin, “Trump Raises \$141 Million in May, Bolstered by Guilty Verdict,” The Associated Press, June 3, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-fundraising-verdict-may-018624b9698b511a8647077356fea583>

¹¹Ximena Bustillo, “Trump Gets Criminal Sentencing Delayed till after Presidential Election,” NPR News, September 6, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/09/06/g-s-1-21151/donald-trump-hush-money-sentencing-new-york>

¹²Devlin Barrett, Perry Stein, and Josh Dawsey, “Trump Charged in Classified Documents Case, Second Indictment in Months,” The Washington Post, June 8, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/06/08/trump-classified-documents-mar-a-lago/>

¹³Madeline Halpert, Ana Faguy, and Anthony Zurcher, “Trump Classified Documents Case Dismissed by Judge,” BBC News, July 15, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cz5rpdrxevro>

¹⁴Aysha Bagchi, “Special Counsel Jack Smith Appeals Dismissal of Donald Trump’s Classified Documents Case,” USA Today, July 17, 2024, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2024/07/17/jack-smith-appeal-trump-documents-case-dismissal/74445213007/>

¹⁵Caroline Vakil, “Florida Judge who Dismissed Case against Donald Trump Hailed by his Allies,” The Hill, July 15, 2024, <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/4772695-trump-allies-judge-classified-documents-case/>

¹⁶Kate Brumback and Eric Tucker, “Trump and 18 Allies Charged in Georgia Election Meddling as Former President Faces 4th Criminal Case,” The Associated Press, August 14, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-georgia-election-investigation-grand-jury-willis-d39562cedfc60d64948708de1b011ed3>

¹⁷Kate Brumback and Alanna Durkin Richer, “Prosecutor Leaves Georgia Election Case Against Trump After Relationship with District Attorney,” The

Finally, Trump's January 6th federal election interference case was also held up by other court proceedings. Trump's lawyers argued that he, as president, had absolute immunity from prosecution for anything he did while in office. To evaluate the merits of the argument, the case was temporarily placed on hold while this issue of immunity was litigated. After routing through the D.C. Court of Appeals, the immunity question was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which decided to take the case. Their ruling was announced on July 1, 2024, the last day of the Court's term. The Court ruled that presidents do have immunity from prosecution, for official acts they take while in office.¹⁸ In sum, Trump's cases had the potential of the former president spending the election year in and out of court and facing potential sentencing; however, each case was delayed until after the election. Thus, if Trump were to win the presidential election, he would have the chance to order closed the cases against him as the head of the executive branch, which is what eventually occurred.¹⁹ Trump often mentioned the cases against him during his rallies in the lead-up to the election as a "witch hunt" and coordinated smear campaign.²⁰

First Presidential Debate

A presidential election that saw a rematch of two candidates from the previous election and who would both serve into their 80s also had an unusual arrangement when it came to presidential debates. Neither Trump nor Biden initially committed to debate each other earlier in the year.²¹ After extensive negotiations between both camps, it was announced that CNN would host a debate between Trump and Biden on June 27 in Atlanta, Georgia, making it the earliest televised presidential debate in American history.²²

The debate was held in a studio without a live audience and included commercial breaks, all departures from the traditional structure of presidential debates. Trump immediately went on the offensive and released a string of falsehoods that the moderators did not fact-check live.²³ Biden's debate performance was immediately troubling to members of his party as they raised serious questions about his ability to wage a strong election campaign.²⁴ In the days after the debate, Biden acknowledged that he had a "bad night" resulting from a cold due to international travel in the weeks before the debate.²⁵ His performance reignited all the fears among those in the Democratic Party about his age and mental acuity, which he thought he had put to rest with his State of the Union address.

Biden's explanation for his poor performance in the debate did not quell growing concern from inside his party. In the ensuing days, chatter among Democrats was whether Biden could run an effective campaign at his advanced age and if he could beat Trump again. Gradually, more Democrats started calling for Biden to drop out of the race and step aside for someone younger and able to beat Trump, yet Biden initially dug in and rebuffed calls to drop out.²⁶ It started with a handful of House Democrats, but slowly more prominent officials began to join the chorus. For instance, California Representative Adam Schiff, running for the Senate, called for Biden to drop out.²⁷ Behind the scenes, party leaders such as former president Barack Obama and former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi pressured Biden to reconsider staying in the race.²⁸ By early July, it was not yet clear how this would all play out, but Biden's approval rating remained lower than Trump's at a similar stage in their presidencies (see Figure 2²⁹).

Associated Press, March 15, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/georgia-election-indictment-fani-willis-trump-60b7dd9642fc9ef7c03d75980692334c>

¹⁸Lawrence Hurley, "Supreme Court Gives Win to Trump, Ruling He has Immunity for Some Acts in Election Interference Indictment," NBC News, July 2, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/supreme-court/supreme-court-rules-trump-may-immunity-federal-election-inter-rcna149135>

¹⁹Eric Tucker and Alanna Durkin Richer, "This Could have been a Year of a Federal Court Reckoning for Trump. Judges had Other Ideas," The Associated Press, October 14, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-federal-court-classified-documents-2020-election-302f87960dbd84d7be5daedaf03328d8>

²⁰Sarah Fortinsky, "Trump Celebrates Dismissal, Calls for Remaining Cases to Follow Suit," The Hill, July 15, 2024, <https://thehill.com/regulation/court-battles/4772713-trump-celebrates-dismissal-classified-case/>

²¹David Bauder, "News organizations urge Biden and Trump to committee to presidential debates during the 2024 campaign," AP News, April 14, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-biden-presidential-debates-election-news-organizations-aa66e90b425e89578f3fe0358bfff5c>

²²Francesca Chambers, Joey Garrison, and David Jackson, "Biden and Trump Agree to Two Debates, with the First in June," USA Today, May 15, 2024, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/05/15/biden-general-election-debate-trump/73697631007/>

²³Michael Gold, "Trump's Debate Performance: Relentless Attacks and Falsehoods," The New York Times, June 28, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/27/us/politics/trump-debate-performance-falsehoods.html>

²⁴Natasha Korecki, Matt Dixon, and Jonathan Allen, "Biden's Presidential Debate Performance Sends Democrats into a Panic," NBC News, June 27, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/biden-debate-performance-democrats-panic-rcna157279>

²⁵Steve Holland, Time Reid, and David Morgan, "Biden Acknowledges Age, Bad Debate Performance but Vows to Beat Trump," Reuters, June 29, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/democrats-scrabble-limit-damage-after-bidens-wobbly-debate-showing-against-trump-2024-06-28/>

²⁶Deepa Shivaram, "Biden Says he's 'Determined on Running' as Calls to Step Aside Grow," NPR News, July 11, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/07/11/nx-s1-5033845/joe-biden-nato-press-conference>

²⁷Deirdre Walsh, "California Rep. Adam Schiff Calls for Biden to Step Aside," NPR News, July 17, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/07/17/nx-s1-5042492/schiff-biden-step-aside>

²⁸Lisa Mascaró, Zeke Miller, Michael Balsamo, and Aamer Madhani, "Obama, Pelosi and Other Democrats Make a Fresh Push for Biden to Reconsider 2024 race," The Associated Press, July 18, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/biden-democrats-drop-out-election-2024-3f9e3d15431fd4974771a54e1d0e4ea7>

²⁹Source: Gallup

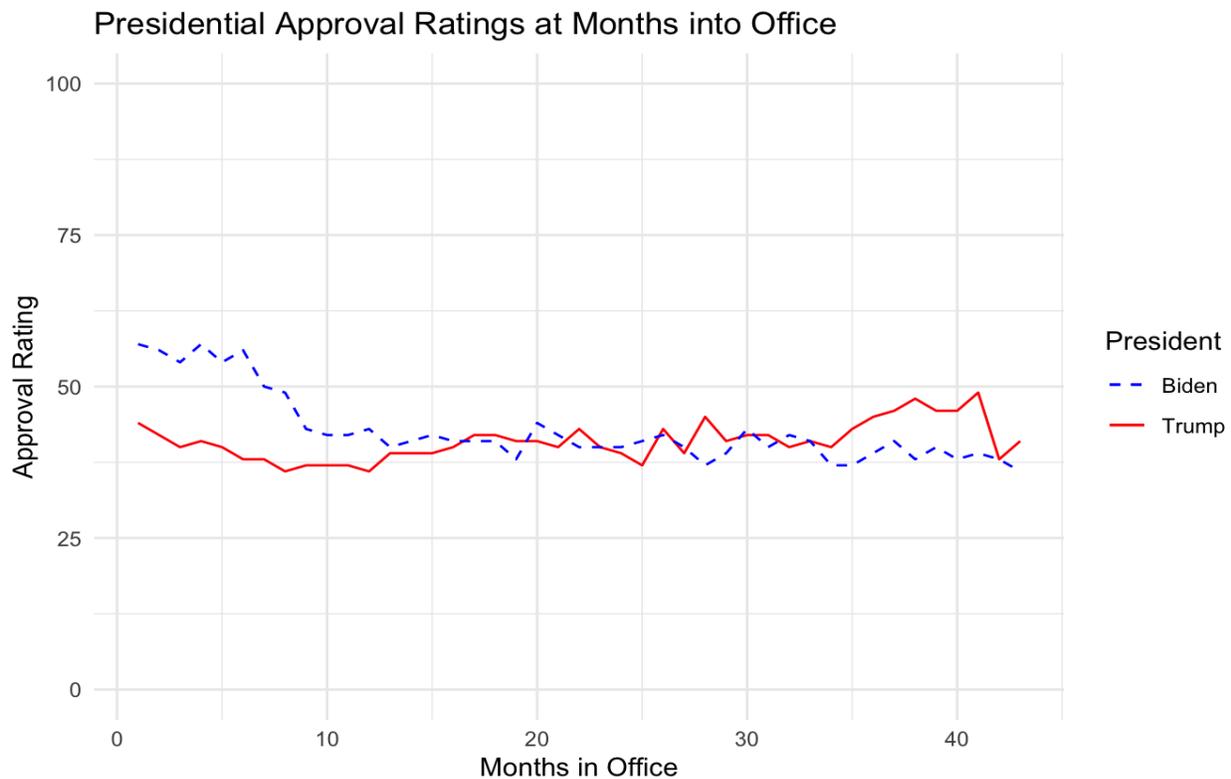


Figure 2. Presidential Approval in Office Prior to Biden Dropping Out

Supreme Court Immunity Ruling

The Supreme Court issued its ruling on Trump’s claim that he had absolute immunity from his many prosecutions due to his prior role as president. As a defense in his January 6th election subversion case, Trump and his lawyers claimed those actions were taken while president and thus he had absolute immunity from prosecution. As noted earlier, this claim was litigated in the court system and eventually made its way to the Supreme Court; meanwhile the legal case was paused while the courts considered this concept. The case was argued in front of the high court on April 25th, which was fraught due to its appearance during an election year. However, the Court waited to announce its ruling until the last day of the term, on July 1st.

In a 6-3 ruling, with all the conservative appointees in the majority, the Court ruled that presidents have immunity for most acts while in office. The distinction was for official versus unofficial acts, and that presidents were not completely immune from all prosecution; the nature of the act would determine its legality.³⁰ Trump immediately claimed victory on social media, writing “BIG WIN FOR OUR CONSTITUTION AND DEMOCRACY. PROUD TO BE AN AMERICAN!”³¹ At the White House, President Biden called it a “dangerous precedent” and that the ruling makes it easier for Trump “to pursue a path to dictatorship.”³² This led the special counsel Jack Smith to take additional time and resubmit his indictment in light of the ruling. In late November, Smith decided to drop the election subversion and classified documents case against Trump, although he added that the decision was not based on the merits of the case.³³

First Trump Assassination Attempt and the 2024 Republican National Convention

While the presidential debate left Democrats in a panic, Republicans moved forward with Trump as their figurehead. The Republican convention took place a few weeks after the debate and the only remaining decision was who he would select as his

³⁰Trump v. United States, 603 U.S. __ (2024)

³¹Sara Dorn, “Trump Declares ‘Big Win’ With Supreme Court Immunity Ruling,” Forbes, July 1, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/saradorn/2024/07/01/trump-declares-big-win-with-supreme-court-immunity-ruling/>

³²John Kruzel and Andrew Chung, “US Supreme Court Rules Trump has Broad Immunity from Prosecution,” Reuters, July 1, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/legal/us-supreme-court-due-rule-trumps-immunity-bid-blockbuster-case-2024-07-01/>

³³Paula Reid, Tierney Sneed, and Devan Cole, “Special Counsel Jack Smith Drops Election Subversion and Classified Documents Case Against Donald Trump,” CNN, November 25, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/11/25/politics/trump-special-counsel-jack-smith/index.html>

running mate. Focus shifted on Saturday, July 13, just before the convention began, when Trump held one of his signature rallies in Butler, Pennsylvania. Not long after he took the stage, shots fired out and Trump was hit in the ear. Secret Service agents rushed him off the stage, but not before he raised a fist in the air in an attempt to project an image of strength. The bullet was just millimeters away from outright killing Trump and became the first assassination attempt on a major party nominee or president in decades.³⁴ This immediately led to calls for calm and toning down the rhetoric.³⁵ The moment was serious enough that Biden, who was vacationing at his home in Delaware, returned to the White House and addressed the public from the Oval Office, calling for unity.³⁶

The aftermath of the assassination attempt led many to question the security measures at the event, including Republican members of Congress and those who attended the political rally. Details slowly emerged but that did not stop conspiracy theories and speculation from popping up, accusing both Trump and Biden of orchestrating the attempt.³⁷ The director of the Secret Service testified before the House Oversight Committee in the weeks after and faced hours of questions for allowing such an attempt on the former president's life; the director acknowledged the agency's failures and initially dodged calls for her resignation before later stepping down.³⁸

The Republican National Convention began just two days after the assassination attempt, with the Trump campaign initially telling speakers to alter their rhetoric and change the overall tone.³⁹ On the first day of the convention, Trump announced his pick for his running mate, first-term Senator JD Vance of Ohio, famous for writing *Hillbilly Elegy* as a memoir about life in Appalachia.⁴⁰ The convention culminated in Trump's acceptance speech, lasting more than 92 minutes and became the longest acceptance speech by a presidential candidate in convention history.⁴¹ Trump, who revealed he had changed his speech after the assassination attempt, appealed for unity at first, and reverted into his familiar campaign lines for the majority of the speech. The convention ended a weeks-long run of good news and momentum for Trump and the Republican party.

Biden Contracts COVID

Calls for Biden to drop out increased in the weeks after the presidential debate. Elected Democrats publicly called for Biden to drop out of the race as the nominee. It started with members in the House and then led to Senators calling for it as well, such as Joe Manchin of West Virginia.⁴² Congressional leaders such as former speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, and House Minority Leader Hakim Jeffries met with Biden privately and encouraged him to drop out, citing bad polling and the potential detrimental effect he would have on down-ballot Democrats.⁴³ On top of all this speculation about what he would do, Biden contracted COVID after campaigning in Las Vegas and holed up at his Delaware home to isolate and recover. This prompted new questions and speculations about Biden's health and ability to campaign over the next few months.⁴⁴

Biden Drops Out / Harris Gains Support as New Nominee

The weekend after the RNC concluded proved to be another extraordinary moment of the campaign. Speculation and pressure continued for Biden to drop out of the race, which was not tempered by the attention on Trump during the RNC. Finally, early in the afternoon on Sunday, July 21, President Biden officially announced on social media his decision to drop out of the campaign, sending shockwaves through the American political establishment. Many wondered if he would endorse his vice

³⁴David Cohen, "Timeline: American Assassination Attempts," Politico, July 14, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/07/14/trump-shot-history-assassins-00168058>

³⁵Tim Reid, Gram Slattery, and Helen Coster, "After Assassination Attempt, Trump and Biden Seek Calm, Unity," Reuters, July 15, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-shooting-raises-questions-about-security-lapses-2024-07-14/>

³⁶Emma Bowman, "Biden Calls for Unity following Trump Assassination Attempt," NPR News, July 14, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/07/14/g-s1-10305/trump-assassination-attempt-biden-unity>

³⁷Marianna Spring, "How Conspiracy Theories Swirled after Donald Trump Shooting," BBC News, July 14, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cyr7pyd0687o>

³⁸Maria Sacchetti, Nick Miroff, and Jacqueline Alemany, "Congress Grills Secret Service Director about Trump Rally Shooting," The Washington Post, July 22, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2024/07/22/secret-service-director-kimberly-cheatle-testimony-trump/>

³⁹Vaughn Hillyard and Allan Smith, "Trump Campaign Edits GOP Convention Speeches to Tone Down Political Rhetoric," NBC News, July 17, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/trump-campaign-edits-gop-convention-speeches-tone-political-rhetoric-rcna162394>

⁴⁰Stephen Fowler, "Trump Names Ohio Sen. J.D. Vance as Vice Presidential Running Mate," NPR News, July 15, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/07/15/nx-s1-5040236/jd-vance-vice-president-trump-rnc>

⁴¹Kinsey Crowley, "Donald Trump Beat his Own Record of Longest Convention Acceptance Speech. How Long was it?," USA Today, July 19, 2024, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/07/19/how-long-trump-talking-rnc-speech/74465591007/>

⁴²Summer Concepcion, "Sen. Joe Manchin Joins Calls for Biden to Drop Out of the Presidential Race," NBC News, July 21, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/sen-joe-manchin-biden-drop-out-presidential-race-rcna162892>

⁴³Scott Wong and Ali Vitali, "As Biden Dug in on Continuing his Campaign, Nancy Pelosi Kept the Pressure On," NBC News, July 22, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/nancy-pelosi-helped-pressure-joe-biden-end-2024-campaign-rcna162943>

⁴⁴Deepa Shivaram, "Biden Tests Positive for COVID. It Comes at an Awkward Time in his Campaign," NPR News, July 17, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/07/17/nx-s1-5043814/biden-covid>

president to succeed him on the ticket, and that question was answered 20 minutes later when he posted again and endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris to be the party's new nominee. Months of pressure and speculation led to the first sitting president since Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968 to decline to run for reelection.⁴⁵

Immediately after Biden's announcement, Vice President Harris proclaimed her intention to win the party's nomination. Harris soon secured endorsements of many of her would-be opponents and seemed to consolidate support around her candidacy. The support also extended to financial strength; in the first 24 hours after Biden's announcement the Harris campaign raised \$81 million, the most raised by a presidential candidate in a 24-hour period.⁴⁶

The day after President Biden's announcement, Harris paid a visit to the campaign headquarters in Delaware, which had fully switched over their support to Harris as the candidate. There Harris previewed her argument against Trump, bringing up her background as a prosecutor that would contrast with Trump's status as a convicted felon. Some in the party had called for a more open primary, but that prospect quickly faded as Harris received endorsements from many of her would-be challengers, including prominent Democratic governors.⁴⁷ Even Nancy Pelosi, who originally signaled she favored a more open process to pick a new nominee, publicly endorsed Harris just a day after Biden's announcement, further strengthening Harris's position as the potential nominee. Even convention delegates coalesced around Harris, who quickly received enough pledges from delegates to clinch the nomination.⁴⁸

Another sign of the party rallying around Harris was the financial support that she and her campaign received in the days after Biden dropped out of the race. The money continued to pour in, with Harris raising \$126 million after three days.⁴⁹ Fundraising had begun to lag while Biden was still in the race,⁵⁰ another pressure point for Biden to drop out, but that trend reversed after he left the race. Less than a month after Biden withdrew, Harris had raised around \$500 million for her presidential campaign.⁵¹ In a further sign of the Harris effect, her campaign raised \$1 billion a month before Election Day, the fastest campaign ever to reach that mark.⁵²

Democratic National Convention and Selection of Walz as Harris's Vice President

The aftermath of Harris being elevated to the top of the ticket led to excitement among Democrats, who were starting to dread the election in the weeks prior to Biden dropping out. Harris immediately began holding rallies and events and the enthusiasm for her campaign was of a different level compared to the Biden campaign.⁵³ This culminated at the Democratic National Convention, which was held in Chicago from August 19-22, 2024, just a month after Biden stepped down from the campaign. In this month span, Harris consolidated support as the party's nominee, planned a convention with a new focus, and chose a vice-presidential running mate. In an era where presidential campaigns seem to run for years on end, this compressed timeline was unique.

Almost immediately after becoming the presumptive Democratic nominee, Harris and her team began to vet potential running mates. The consensus among the political class was that she needed an experienced white man to balance her ticket and appeal to a group that Donald Trump had effectively targeted in prior elections.⁵⁴ Among the names that were bandied about in the press were Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro, Arizona Senator Mark Kelly, Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear, and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg. In the end, a bit of a dark horse candidate emerged to win the nomination: Minnesota Governor Tim Walz was announced as the pick on August 6th, a couple weeks before the convention. He was a governor of a midwestern state, a member of the national guard, and a former high school teacher and football coach, all parts of his biography that were used in the ensuing weeks as a way to reach out to working-class white voters. Immediately after his

⁴⁵Toluse Olorunnipa and Patrick Svitek, "Biden Makes Stunning Decision to Pull Out of 2024 Race," The Washington Post, July 21, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/07/21/joe-biden-drops-out/>

⁴⁶Andrew Feinberg, "Kamala Harris Raises \$81 Million in First 24 Hours of Presidential Campaign," The Independent, July 22, 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/kamala-harris-donors-campaign-finance-b2584019.html>

⁴⁷Ken Thomas, "Kamala Harris Glides Toward Democratic Presidential Nomination, Contest with Trump," The Wall Street Journal, July 22, 2024, https://www.wsj.com/politics/policy/kamala-harris-2024-democratic-presidential-nomination-cf8c80ff?mod=politics_feat2_policy_pos1

⁴⁸Ethan Cohen, Molly English, Matt Holt, and Sydney Topf, "Harris Secures Enough Delegate Endorsements to Win the Democratic Presidential Nomination," CNN, July 22, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/22/politics/kamala-harris-delegates-democratic-presidential-nomination/index.html>

⁴⁹Joey Garrison, "Kamala Harris Campaign Maps out 'Path to Victory,' Raises \$126 Million in Three Days," USA Today, July 24, 2024, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/07/24/kamala-harris-campaign-charts-path-to-victory-over-trump/74521667007/>

⁵⁰Natasha Korecki, Jonathan Allen, and Monica Alba, "'It's Already Disastrous': Biden Campaign Fundraising Takes a Major Hit," NBC News, July 10, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/disastrous-biden-campaign-fundraising-takes-major-hit-rcna161214>

⁵¹Jeff Mason and Nandita Bose, "Exclusive: Harris' Election Effort Raises Around \$500 Million in a Month, Sources Say," Reuters, August 21, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/harris-election-effort-raises-around-500-million-month-sources-say-2024-08-20/>

⁵²Shane Goldmacher and Maggie Haberman, "Kamala Harris Has Raised \$1 Billion Since Entering 2024 Presidential Race," The New York Times, October 9, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/09/us/politics/harris-billion-dollar-fundraising.html>

⁵³Sara Dorn, "Democratic Enthusiasm Nearly Doubles After Harris Enters Race, Poll Finds," Forbes, August 14, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/saradorn/2024/08/14/democratic-enthusiasm-nearly-doubles-after-harris-enters-race-poll-finds/>

⁵⁴Ashley Parker and Dylan Wells, "Why Almost Everyone Assumes Kamala Harris has to Pick a White Man as VP," The Washington Post, July 25, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/07/25/harris-white-man-vice-president/>

announcement, he and Harris did a swing state tour and held rallies in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Arizona, and Nevada where they were met with large and enthusiastic crowds.⁵⁵

The Democratic National Convention opened in Chicago with space for President Biden to receive his recognition for stepping aside for the good of the party and country. Biden was the featured keynote speaker on the first night, stating “I love the job, but I love my country more.”⁵⁶ The rest of the convention featured speeches from a lot of notable celebrities and politicians ranging from Oprah and Barack and Michelle Obama to Hillary and Bill Clinton, to Tim Walz, Doug Emhoff, and eventually the Democratic nominee Kamala Harris.

One notable aspect of the convention was that several Republicans, some of which worked for Donald Trump during his presidency, were given speaking slots to denounce Trump and endorse Harris. Among them were former Georgia Lieutenant Governor Geoff Duncan, former Homeland Security Advisor to Vice President Mike Pence, Olivia Troye, former White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham, and former Representative Adam Kinzinger.⁵⁷ This trend continued through the fall, when the Harris campaign sought and rolled out endorsements from prominent Republicans. The largest of these came from former Representative Liz Cheney and her father, former Vice President Dick Cheney,⁵⁸ which seemed unthinkable just 20 years earlier, as Democrats had vilified Cheney as George W. Bush’s second in command.

Second Assassination Attempt on Donald Trump

Another would-be assassin to Trump was ultimately stopped by the Secret Service on September 15. Trump was golfing at one of his courses in Florida when an agent saw a gun barrel sticking out through the fence across the course. Agents fired on the man, who fled and was later picked up in the area. Trump was at the previous hole and thus was never in sight of the shooter, but it was another too-close call for violence during a presidential campaign.⁵⁹

Vice Presidential Debate between Vance and Walz

Conventional wisdom and research has shown that, while they receive media coverage at the time of announcement, vice presidential running mates often do not have much effect on presidential elections (Aldrich, Carson, Gomez, and Merolla 2023; Devine and Kopko 2020). As the vice-presidential debate on October 1st approached, many asked whether it would have any effect on the status of the race.⁶⁰ Yet as the presidential debates for this race went outside of the traditional system of using the Commission on Presidential Debates, the VP debate was the final debate of the race. Harris had challenged Trump to a second debate, but no date was ever agreed upon. This left the running mates to have the final word in a fall debate. The debate was notable as it was more civil and polite than their running mates were, and several times Vance and Walz agreed with each other despite their apparent differences. There also a more in-depth policy discussion than the presidential debate. Of course, the running mates attacked the top of each ticket as Trump and Harris were mentioned frequently during the debate.⁶¹

The Final Campaign Stretch

Both campaigns quickly ramped up their messaging efforts in the final campaign stretch, with candidates emphasizing their unique stances on critical issues like the economy, healthcare, and foreign policy. The Republican nominee, Donald Trump, doubled down on his promises of economic growth and national security, drawing attention to his prior administration’s policies and challenging the current administration’s handling of inflation and foreign conflicts. Meanwhile, Democratic nominee Kamala Harris focused on continuing the progress made over the past four years, underscoring initiatives to tackle climate change, expand healthcare access, and promote social equity.⁶² Each candidate’s strategies reflected their distinct visions for the nation’s future, aiming to consolidate their bases and win over undecided voters in swing states like Georgia and Pennsylvania.

⁵⁵Darlene Superville, “Early Harris-Walz Rallies Feature Big Crowds, Talk of ‘Joy’ and Unsolicited GOP Counterprogramming,” The Associated Press, August 11, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/harris-walz-rallies-battleground-states-vance-trump-7da99aace01fec1c784fba27fdbce558>

⁵⁶Kaia Hubbard and Kathryn Watson, “DNC Night 1: Biden says, ‘I Love the Job, but I Love my Country More’ in keynote speech,” CBS News, August 22, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/dnc-day-1/>

⁵⁷Kathryn Watson, “These Republicans Denounced Trump and Endorsed Harris at the DNC. Here’s What They Said,” CBS News, August 23, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/republicans-denounce-trump-endorse-harris-dnc/>

⁵⁸Eric Tucker and Will Weissert, “Dick Cheney was Once Vilified by Democrats. Now he’s Backing Harris. Will it Matter?” The Associated Press, September 14, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/cheney-gonzales-harris-endorsement-trump-mainstream-republicans-224d7be9ee7ebb6dc699bca5339a4458>

⁵⁹Adriana Gomez Licon and Will Weissert, “5 Things to Know About the Apparent Assassination Attempt on Trump,” The Associated Press, September 17, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-assassination-attempt-what-to-know-564c56e167c3cdc6c50f6a2e91db9a6c>

⁶⁰Dafydd Townley, “Will the US Vice-Presidential Debate make a Difference? Here’s What Happened,” The Conversation, October 2, 2024, <https://theconversation.com/will-the-us-vice-presidential-debate-make-a-difference-heres-what-happened-240259>

⁶¹Michelle L. Price, Chris Megerian, Jill Colvin, and Will Weissert, “Walz and Vance Go in Depth on Policy While Attacking Each Other’s Running Mates in VP debate,” The Associated Press, October 2, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/vance-walz-vice-presidential-debate-election-66ff2e5e45a8dda55b0a2242fc238fdc>

⁶²“What are Harris and Trump’s Policies?” BBC, October 23, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwy343z5311o>

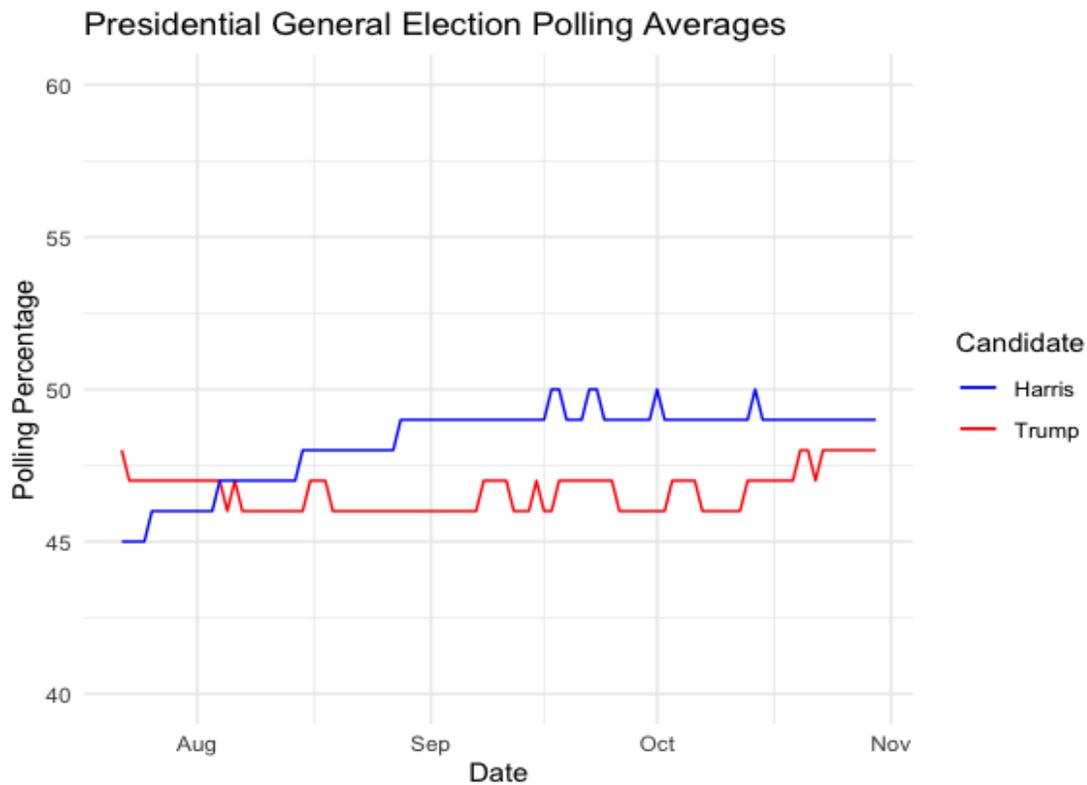


Figure 3. General Election Polling Averages

Additionally, the latter part of October saw a series of endorsements from high-profile figures and organizations, adding further momentum to both campaigns in what was projected to be a very tight race (see Figure 3⁶³).⁶⁴ Harris received endorsements from influential progressive leaders and labor unions, which were used to help bolster her standing among younger voters and working-class Americans.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, Trump earned support from prominent conservative groups, emphasizing his pro-business stance and strong views on immigration.⁶⁶ As the election neared, both campaigns increased their outreach efforts, leveraging these endorsements to sway undecided voters. Along with intense campaigning in swing states, both candidates sought to generate heightened excitement among their supporters, setting the stage for a tightly contested race leading up to Election Day.

The Once and Future President

Donald Trump was reelected as president in 2024, marking the first time since Grover Cleveland's non-consecutive terms in the late 1800s that a former U.S. president returned to office after losing a previous election. Trump's reelection symbolized a profound shift in modern political norms, challenging the tradition of a single-term defeat being a final exit from the presidency. This unprecedented comeback highlighted the enduring appeal of Trump's populist message among a substantial base of voters, reflecting a unique resilience within his political movement and solidifying his status as one of the most polarizing and influential figures in recent U.S. history. Whether this victory reinforced a populist style of politics, with a focus on nationalism, skepticism toward traditional political institutions, and appeal to disenfranchised voter groups will be determined in the years that follow this election (Carson, Hitefield, and Wall 2025).

In the end, Trump won 312 electoral votes and Harris won 226 as shown in Figure 4. Trump was able to sweep all seven swing states and flip six of the states that went for Biden in 2020: Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and

⁶³Source: Polling averages from *The New York Times*

⁶⁴Jeff Zeleny, "Obama Recalls Trump's 2020 Election Chaos While Campaigning for Harris in Michigan," CNN, October 22, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/10/22/politics/obama-rally-for-harris-detroit-trump/index.html>

⁶⁵Jarrett Renshaw and Nandita Bose, "At Star-Studded Georgia Rally, Harris and Obama Push Early Voting in Tight Race," Reuters, October 25, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/harris-flex-star-power-georgia-rally-with-springsteen-obama-2024-10-24/>

⁶⁶Associated Press, "The Latest: Trump Targets His Base and Harris Goes after Moderates as Early Voting Numbers Rise," ABC News, October 23, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/latest-trump-rallies-north-carolina-harris-makes-cable-115061049>

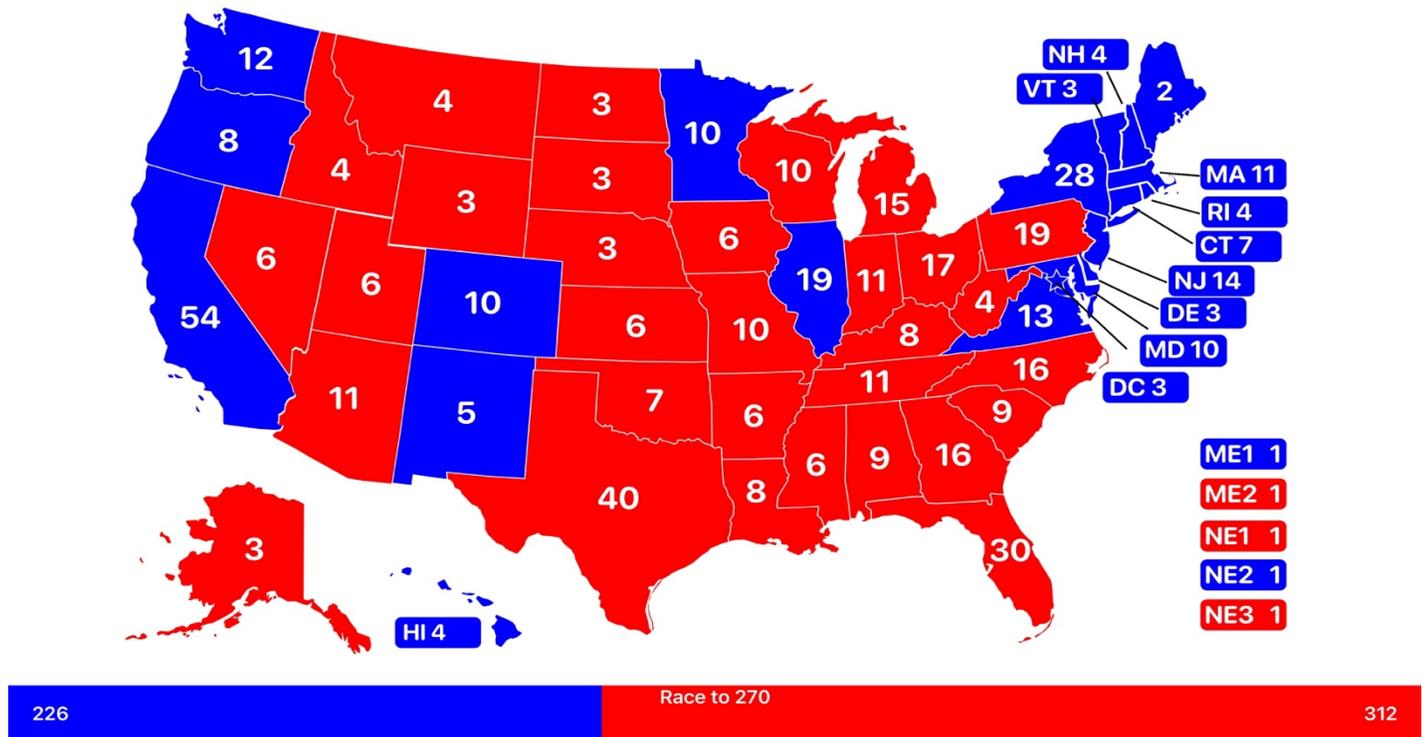


Figure 4. 2024 Electoral College Votes

Wisconsin. In addition, Trump also won the national popular vote, winning 49.9% with just over 77 million total votes while Harris won 48.4% with just under 75 million votes. This win is notable as Trump is the first Republican presidential candidate to win the national popular vote since George W. Bush in 2004. In Table 2 we see how Trump was able to increase his vote totals with each of his three elections, while his Democratic challengers each got different totals, owing to changes in voter enthusiasm and turnout. Trump went from losing two straight popular votes to winning the popular vote in his third consecutive election. Turnout for this election was 64.1%, down from a recent high-water mark of 66.4% in 2020.⁶⁷

Table 2. National Popular Vote Totals in 2024, 2020, and 2016

Year	Candidate	%	Total
2024	Trump	49.9	77,269,243
	Harris	48.4	74,983,555
2020	Trump	46.8	74,224,319
	Biden	51.3	81,284,666
2016	Trump	45.9	62,985,106
	Clinton	48	65,853,625

By examining exit polls from the 2024 election, we can gain preliminary insights on why the electorate reelected Trump to a second term and Harris was not able to gain sufficient support to win the election. These polls are, of course, only the first data we have access to so soon after the election, yet they help paint a picture of the way voters behaved and how the presidential race was won as they reflect the views of voters in swing states. Though many were predicting this to be the “gender election” where Trump would win the majority of men and Harris the majority of women, the exit polls paint a different picture.

⁶⁷University of Florida Election lab: election.lab.ufl.edu.

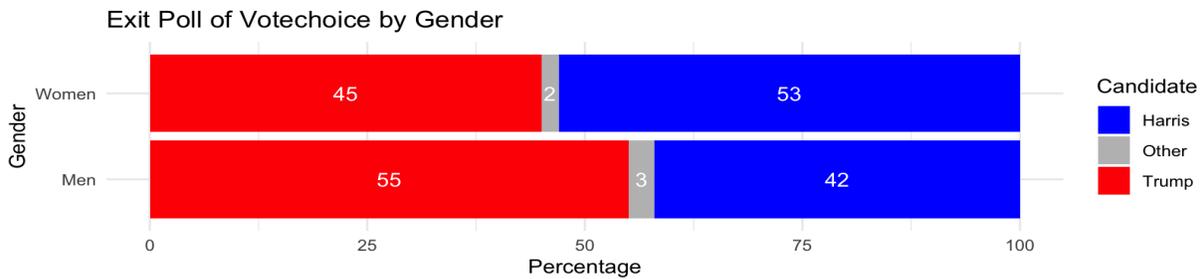


Figure 5. Exit Polls of Swing States by Gender

In Figure 5⁶⁸, we see the vote choice in 2024 broken down by gender of the respondent. While Harris did win a majority of women in key states, Trump still earned the vote of 45% of women who showed up for the election—not exactly the landslide among women that Harris and her team were probably hoping for. On the other side, Trump received the votes of 55% of men in these states while Harris earned only 43%.

In Figure 6⁶⁹, we see the exit polls of swing states broken done by race of the voter, another commonly referenced demographic in elections. Among white respondents, Trump won 57% and Harris 41%. Black voters in this exit poll went 85% for Harris, but Trump won 13% of the Black vote, a higher percentage than many were expecting. The most revealing category here is the breakdown in support among the Hispanic/Latino segment of the electorate. Given Trump’s harsh rhetoric against immigrants, many expecting Latinos to be repulsed by his candidacy. Yet, he won 46%, almost a majority, according to the exit poll.

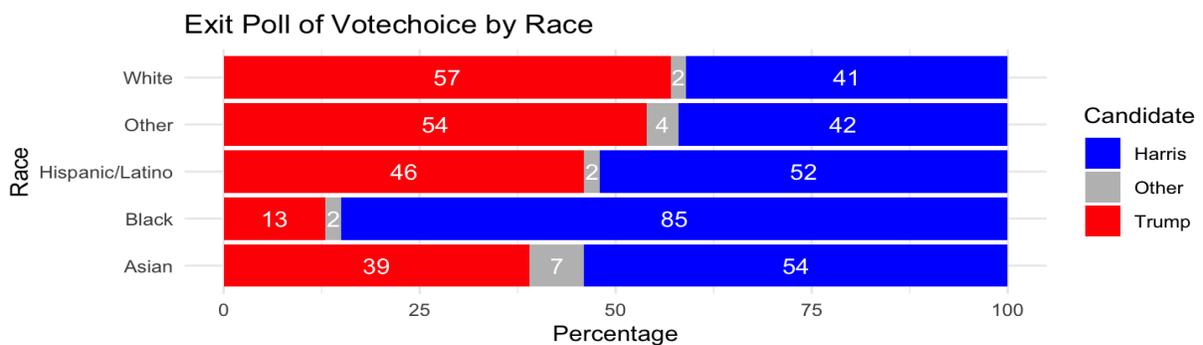


Figure 6. Exit Polls of Swing States by Race

In our final look at the swing states exit polls, Figure 7⁷⁰ has level of support broken down by education. Democrats traditionally win among more highly educated voters, yet we see that Trump was able to cut into Harris’s lead with higher-educated voters, one of the reasons he was able to emerge as the winner. The category Trump did the worst with was those with advanced degrees but was able to do fairly well among all other educational categories.

In the end, Harris was not able to capture the anti-Trump momentum that propelled Biden into the White House in 2020. According to one analysis, she won almost four percentage points less of the popular vote than Biden did in 2020, marking the steepest drop in support for the Democratic nominee since 1980. This is in line with global voting trends, as incumbents lost vote share in 10 major countries that held national elections in 2024.⁷¹ Concerns about inflation and the economy, as evidenced by the exit polling mentioned previously, were also part of a global trend. Ipsos, which measures the monthly top issue of concern around the world, had inflation followed by crime and violence as the two top issues at the end of 2024, two issues that Trump campaigned on heavily (Carson, Hitefield, and Wall 2025).⁷²

By winning the presidency again, the status of Trump’s legal cases no longer remain in question. As the Department of

⁶⁸Source: NBC News.

⁶⁹Source: NBC News.

⁷⁰Source: NBC News.

⁷¹John Burn-Murdoch, “Democrats Join 2024’s Graveyard of Incumbents,” The Financial Times, November 7, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/e8ac09ea-c300-4249-af7d-109003afb893>

⁷²Ipsos, “What Worries the World – August 2024,” September 24, 2024, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/what-worries-world-august-2024>

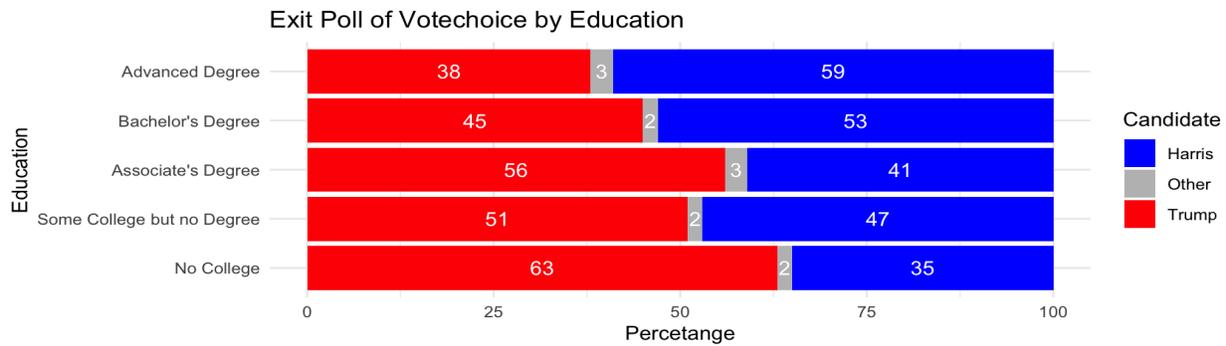


Figure 7. Exit Polls of Swing States by Education

Justice has a longstanding policy of not prosecuting sitting presidents,⁷³ the federal cases against him have been wound down. The special counsel overseeing both federal cases has moved to dismiss the cases, and the presiding judge approved,⁷⁴ ending them for now. The other cases in Georgia and New York are also in doubt as prosecuting and sentencing a sitting president would be not only challenging but unprecedented. Trump, for now, seems to have received a “Get out of jail free” card by winning the White House once again.

Trump’s return to the White House has impacted political dynamics by influencing policy directions and party alignments. His administration has revisited and strengthened policies from his first term, rolling back changes made by the Biden administration. Internationally, Trump’s reelection has signaled a renewed shift toward America-first policies, reshaping alliances and sparking questions about the stability and predictability of U.S. foreign policy. Domestically, Trump’s unprecedented return has deepened divisions within both parties, as his approach often defies traditional Republican orthodoxy and has spurred a counter-response from progressive Democrats. His reelection has also provoked a vigorous public debate on the strength of American democratic norms, continuity in leadership, and the adaptability of U.S. institutions in times of political polarization (Jacobson 2025).

2024 Congressional Elections: U.S. House Primary Elections

In addition to the high-stakes presidential election, all eyes were on races for the U.S. Congress given the close partisan divide in each chamber. Starting with the U.S. House of Representatives, the 2024 U.S. House primary elections witnessed some movement, with four incumbents failing to win their congressional primaries: Jerry L. Carl, Jr. in Alabama’s 1st district, Bob Good in Virginia’s 5th, Jamaal Bowman in New York’s 16th, and Cori Bush in Missouri’s 1st. While Dan Newhouse in Washington’s 4th district failed to come in first in his primary, the use of a top-two primary system in the state allowed him to compete in the general election, which he later won. This primary cycle reflected shifting dynamics within both the Republican and Democratic parties, as incumbents faced serious challenges and, in a few cases, failed to hold onto their seats.

A total of 1,745 candidates competed in the House primaries, with men significantly outnumbering women. Among these candidates, 1,281 were men, making up 73% of the total, while 464 were women. Both parties showed gender disparities in their candidate pools, with Republicans running 784 men and 165 women, and Democrats running 496 men and 299 women (Carson, Hitefield, and Wall 2025). Only one candidate fell outside the two-party structure, an independent male candidate. This gender gap underscores the continuing male dominance in U.S. House candidacies, although Democratic candidates were relatively more balanced between men and women than their Republican counterparts (Fox and Lawless 2014; Thomsen 2020).

Quality challengers—defined as candidates with prior electoral experience—comprised 227 of the total candidates, or 13%. A majority of these quality challengers were men (157), while 70 were women. The Republican Party fielded slightly more quality challengers than the Democrats, with 126 total (110 men and 16 women) compared to the Democrats’ 101 (47 men and 54 women). Notably, the Democratic quality challengers were more gender-balanced, with a substantial representation of women (Carson, Hitefield, and Wall 2025). This trend may indicate strategic recruiting by Democrats to enhance gender diversity in their candidate pool (Carson and Jacobson 2024; Fox and Lawless 2010; Thomsen and Swers 2014).

Incumbents made up 22.58% of the total number of candidates competing in the House primaries, with 394 members of Congress seeking re-election. Most incumbents were men (277) compared to women (117). The Republican Party had more

⁷³Ken Dilanian and Laura Jarrett, “DOJ Moving to Wind Down Trump Criminal Cases Before He Takes Office,” NBC News, November 6, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/doj-moving-wind-trump-criminal-cases-takes-office-rcna178930>

⁷⁴Katherine Faulders, Alexander Mallin, and Peter Charalambous, “Trump election case is tossed after special counsel Jack Smith requests dismissal citing ‘categorical’ DOJ policy,” ABC News, November 25, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/special-counsel-jack-smith-moves-dismiss-election-interference/story?id=116207758>

Table 3. Total Candidates and Quality Challengers in Congressional Primaries

Total Candidates	1745	
Gender	Male	Female
	1281	464
Party	Republican	Democrat
	949	796
Quality Challengers	227	
Gender	Male	Female
	157	70
Party	Republican	Democrat
	126	101

Table 4. Incumbents and Amateurs in Congressional Primaries

Incumbents	394	
Gender	Male	Female
	277	117
Party	Republican	Democrat
	202	192
Amateurs	1124	
Gender	Male	Female
	847	277
Party	Republican	Democrat
	621	503

male incumbents (166) and fewer female incumbents (33) compared to the Democrats, who ran 107 men and 83 women as incumbents. With four incumbents losing their primaries, it appears that both parties faced a degree of internal challenges, possibly due to ideological divisions or dissatisfaction with the status quo within their respective bases (Carson, Hitefield, and Wall 2025).

In contrast to quality challengers and incumbents, a significant portion of the candidate pool consisted of political amateurs. These 1,124 candidates, making up 64.4% of the total, are individuals without prior political experience or notable endorsements. Of the amateurs, 847 were men and 277 were women, with the Republican Party fielding most of these inexperienced candidates (621), followed by the Democrats (503) and one independent. This influx of amateurs reflects both the ongoing interest in political office among everyday citizens and the potential for these newcomers to bring fresh perspectives, though they often face challenges in fundraising and building name recognition (Carson and Jacobson 2024; Porter and Treul 2024).

The 2024 primary outcomes, shaped by a mix of incumbents, quality challengers, and amateurs, reveal notable trends in candidate diversity, gender representation, and party dynamics (see Figure 8 for differences across party). With high-stakes issues motivating diverse candidates across the political spectrum, the general election promised to be competitive, particularly in districts where incumbents have either lost or shown vulnerability. The mix of experienced and amateur candidates highlights the variety of voices and backgrounds that will ultimately shape the next U.S. House of Representatives.

U.S. House General Elections

After all the votes were counted, Republicans took control of both the House and Senate, giving the party unified government control heading into 2025. In the House, Republicans ended up with 220 seats to Democrats’ 215 seats. The House initially was seen as more likely for Democrats to end up with the majority given various events of the previous two years, but in the end Republicans were able to hold onto the majority, even after a chaotic series of events during the 118th Congress (Carson, Hitefield, and Wall 2025; Jacobson 2025).

Figure 9 tracks the percentage of U.S. House incumbents facing quality challengers from 1904 to 2024, illustrating fluctuations in competitiveness of congressional elections over time. The figure shows a general trend of rising competition since the early 20th century, with notable peaks in the 1940s, 1970s, and 1990s. These peaks likely correspond with periods of political realignment, increased polarization, and shifts in party control, factors that often spur challengers to run against established incumbents. The 1970s and 1990s, in particular, show sharp increases in quality challengers running, a pattern that

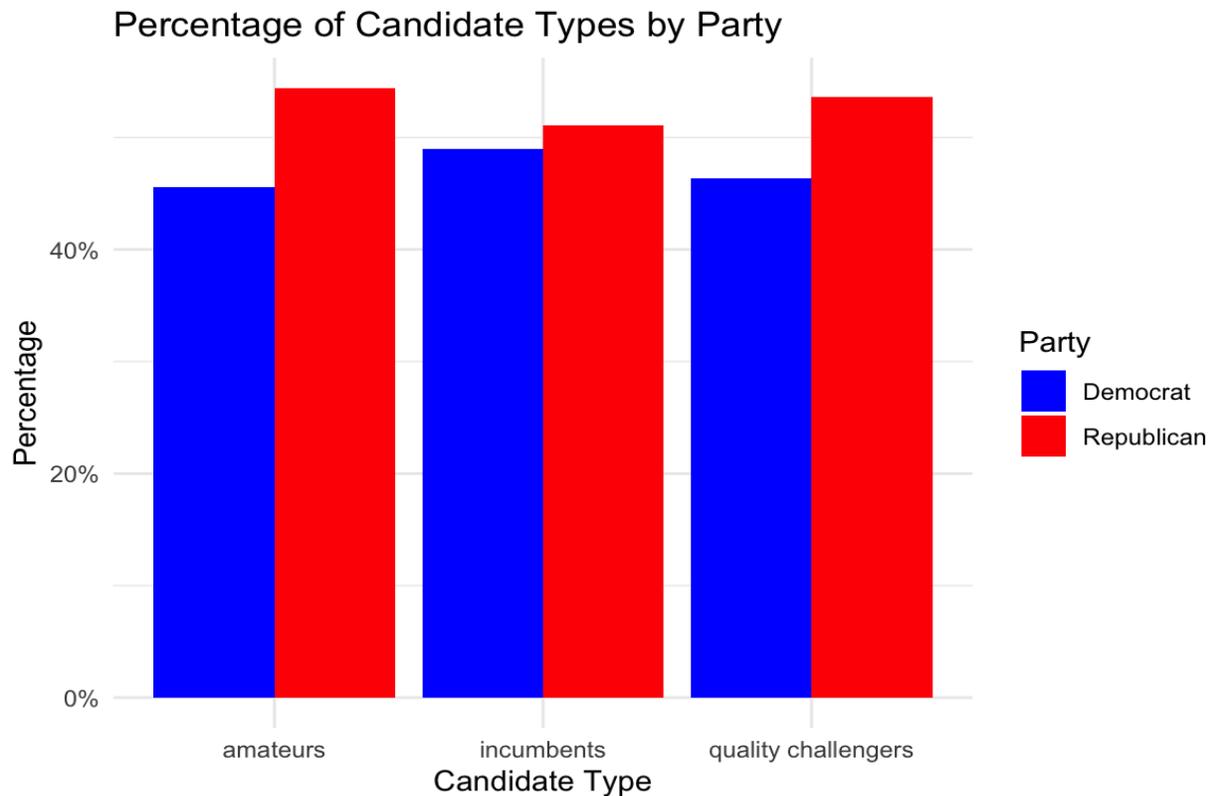


Figure 8. Percentage of Congressional Primary Candidates by Party

aligns with the rise of more ideologically motivated candidates during times of heightened political tension and reform.

In recent years, particularly since 2000, the percentage of incumbents facing quality challengers has dipped slightly compared to earlier decades, reflecting a sustained period of political polarization and factionalism within both major parties along with patterns of increased nationalization (Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2024). The 2024 election cycle continues this trend, with 17.2 percentage of incumbents facing experienced challengers, higher than the 10 percent we observed in 2018, but still slightly below the average of 20 percent witnessed since World War II. This sustained competition despite increasingly high levels of nationalization suggests that incumbents today are under more scrutiny and face greater pressure to align with their party base, as high-profile quality challengers are more willing to challenge incumbents they view as insufficiently representative of party ideology or priorities (Carson and Jacobson 2024).

Most House incumbents secured reelection in the 2024 elections due to a combination of favorable districting and strong partisan alignment within their constituencies. After the 2020 Census, many districts were redrawn to solidify party advantages, creating “safe” seats where incumbents enjoy substantial support from voters who align with their party’s ideology. This built-in advantage reduces electoral vulnerability for incumbents and limits the likelihood of significant shifts in control within these districts. Additionally, incumbents benefit from established name recognition, donor networks, and constituent relationships, all of which reinforce their positions and discourage serious challenges from opposing party candidates (Carson and Jacobson 2024). Consequently, while a modest number of competitive districts remain, the majority of House incumbents are well-insulated from serious threats, leading analysts to predict that most will retain their seats and contribute to a relatively stable partisan landscape in the House absent strong partisan tides (Jacobson 2025).

U.S. Senate Elections

The 2024 U.S. Senate elections presented a challenging landscape for Democrats as they defended a disproportionate number of seats compared to Republicans. With 34 Senate seats up for grabs, Democrats or affiliated independents held 23 of those, while Republicans held only 11. This imbalance put Democrats largely on the defensive, particularly in states where Republicans maintain significant electoral advantages. For Republicans, this was a strategic opportunity to regain control of the Senate by flipping just one or two seats, depending on the outcome of the presidential race and vice-presidential tie-breaking vote. The greater number of vulnerable Democratic seats, combined with the historical tendency for the president’s party to lose seats in

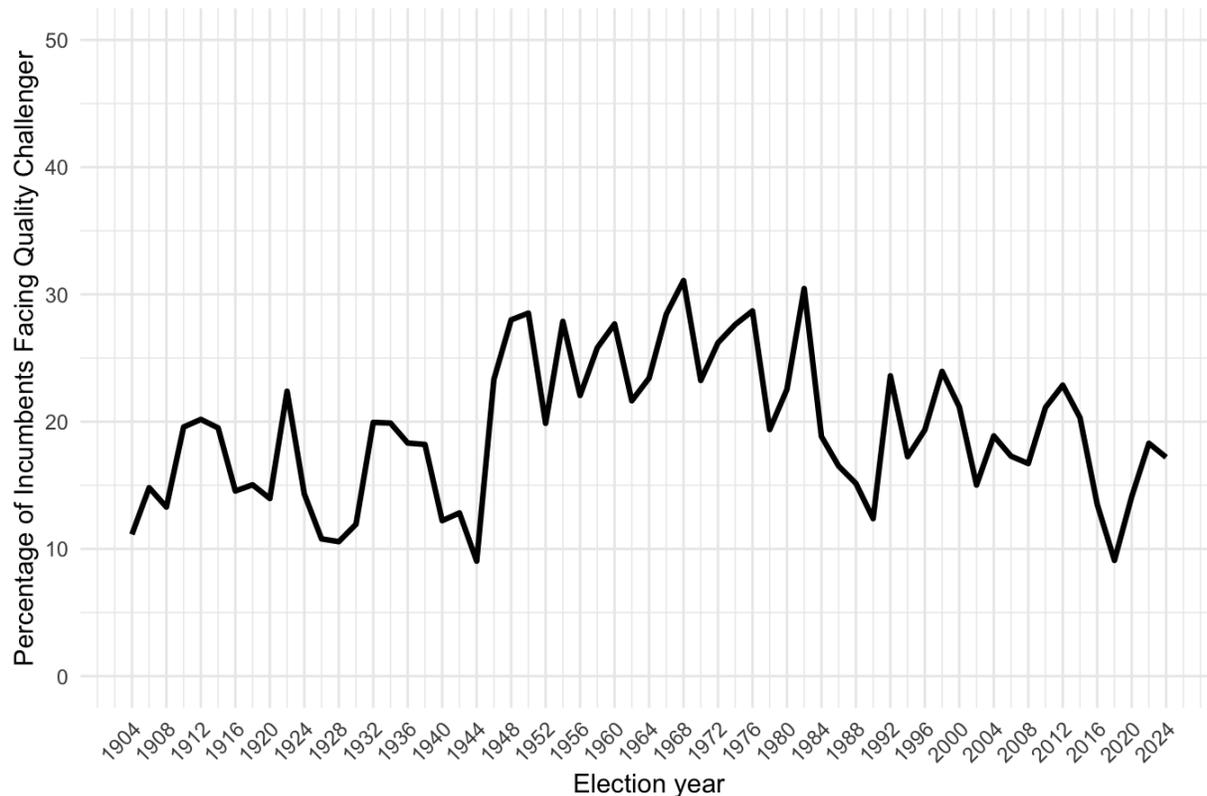


Figure 9. Percentage of Incumbents Facing Quality Challengers, 1904-2024

midterm or off-cycle elections (Carson and Jacobson 2024), significantly intensified the pressure on Democratic incumbents, especially in red or swing states.

Key battleground states this year included red-leaning Montana, West Virginia, and Ohio, where Democratic Senators Jon Tester, Joe Manchin (an independent who caucused with Democrats), and Sherrod Brown were involved in highly contested races. Tester and Brown are both longstanding Democratic figures in states that voted solidly for Trump in previous elections, and they faced substantial pressure from Republican challengers aligning with the state's conservative leanings. Manchin's planned retirement in West Virginia added to the Democratic vulnerability, as the state has become one of the most reliably Republican in the country. Given that each of these states supported Donald Trump by significant margins, Republicans were well-positioned to capitalize on favorable demographic and ideological trends to secure these seats.

Beyond the strongholds of Montana, West Virginia, and Ohio, Republicans were eyeing competitive Senate races in states with shifting political dynamics, including Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.⁷⁵ Each of these states voted for Trump in 2016 but shifted toward Biden in 2020, highlighting their swing-state status and the possibility of a return to Republican support. The Democrats held the Senate seats in Arizona, Nevada, Wisconsin, and Michigan, and Republicans flipped the Pennsylvania seat. The GOP's messaging in these states focused on themes like inflation, economic growth, and border security, which align well with concerns of moderate or conservative voters. Democrats, for their part, emphasized issues like abortion rights, healthcare, and climate change, aiming to appeal to younger and progressive-leaning voters in an effort to stem potential electoral losses. The result was a dynamic campaign environment where voter turnout and issue prioritization played pivotal roles (Jacobson 2025).

In the end, Republicans were able to take back the majority of the upper house, including flipping four Democratic-held seats: Montana, Ohio, West Virginia, Pennsylvania. Republicans ended up with 53 seats and Democrats with 47, giving the GOP a majority but not a filibuster-proof one. In the days after the election Republicans elected Senator John Thune of South Dakota⁷⁶ to be the new majority leader, replacing Mitch McConnell, and not going with Trump's preferred choice of Rick

⁷⁵Siobhan Hughes, "Republicans Put Pressure on Democrats in 'Blue Wall' Senate Races," The Wall Street Journal, October 26, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/politics/elections/republicans-put-pressure-on-democrats-in-blue-wall-senate-races-af3b3fe0>

⁷⁶Riley Begin, "Republicans reject Trump allies' pick, elect John Thune as next Senate majority leader," USA Today, November 13, 2024, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/11/13/john-thune-elected-senate-majority-leader-gop/76118719007/>

Scott. Thune has already played an important role in the new Congress, helping to shepherd through Trump's cabinet picks, judicial nominees, and major legislation. How the new and narrow Republican Senate majority will be able to function in a second Trump term is a major question in the 119th Congress (Carson, Hitefield, and Wall 2025).

Conclusion

The 2024 presidential and congressional campaigns underscored the deeply entrenched divisions within the United States, where razor-thin margins and intense partisanship defined the electoral landscape. Both presidential candidates faced significant challenges, with each party rallying its base around contrasting visions for the country's future, from economic and border policy to social issues like healthcare and reproductive rights. The unusually contentious races for both House and Senate control further reflected the polarized environment, as Democrats and Republicans fiercely contested battleground states and districts that would decide the balance of power. This campaign cycle's tone and strategic focus highlight a country not only ideologically split but increasingly regionally divided, as partisan loyalties solidify in certain geographic areas, making compromise and cross-party appeal even rarer.

Despite this increasingly polarized context, the 2024 election results yielded a Republican trifecta: control of the presidency, the House of Representatives, and the Senate. In the House, where incumbents generally maintained control due to safe districting, only a few swing districts changed hands. The Senate's composition, in contrast, was altered by narrow and hotly contested races in red and purple states, underscoring how even a slight tilt in voter turnout or issue priority can determine the balance of power.

Looking forward, the closely contested 2024 election reinforces the likelihood that American politics will remain sharply divided, with little incentive for either side to moderate. Both parties have become more ideologically cohesive and less inclined toward centrist positions, making compromise legislation increasingly rare. This electoral cycle also witnessed a continuation of the trend where control of Congress, particularly the Senate, hinges on a few critical swing states. With such high stakes placed on narrow races, both parties are expected to invest heavily in future battlegrounds in the upcoming midterms, intensifying efforts to mobilize their bases and appeal to undecided or independent voters in these key regions. The cyclical nature of these shifts will likely continue to perpetuate a pattern of precarious majorities, where the balance of power can shift back and forth based on slight voter preferences or turnout variations (Lee 2016).

In sum, the 2024 election exemplified the enduring partisan polarization that currently defines American political life. This division poses significant challenges for governance, with each party entrenched in positions that make bipartisan cooperation difficult. As the country moves forward, the implications of this political landscape are already being felt in legislative standoffs, executive maneuvers, and intensified state-level battles over policies (Jacobson 2025). The 2024 election thus signals not only the potential for continued polarization but also the need for innovative approaches to policy and governance that can operate effectively in a deeply divided nation.

Acknowledgments

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Front-end or Back-end? Automatic Voter Registration Method and The Implications for Voter Turnout in the 2022 Midterms

Megan Wall¹

¹Ph. D. Candidate, Department of Political Science, University of Georgia, Megan.Wall@uga.edu

ABSTRACT

Automatic voter registration (AVR) is becoming increasingly common in the United States. As of 2023, 25 states have adopted AVR measures, up from two in 2016. While previous research has evaluated if and how access to AVR impacts voter participation, less research has focused on how the method of automatic voter registration affects voter participation. This study uses data from the 2022 CPS Voter Supplement and the 2022 Cost of Voting Index to show that while having an AVR policy on the books increased individual-level turnout in the 2022 midterm elections, the method of AVR through which someone registered to vote (either front-end or back-end) did not have a differential impact on turnout.

Introduction

Since Oregon implemented its automatic voter registration (AVR) law in 2016, 24 states have followed suit, with Minnesota being the most recent state to adopt an AVR measure. Automatic voter registration is a process through which potential voters can be registered to vote during a visit to a state government agency. In the United States, automatic voter registration happens in one of two ways: front-end AVR or back-end AVR. In front-end AVR, potential voters are asked whether they would like to register to vote during an interaction with a state agency. In back-end AVR, people who visit select state agencies are registered automatically via the information they provide to the agency.¹

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the impact of automatic voter registration methods on individual-level turnout in the 2022 midterm elections. Previous work has been done to assess the relationship between AVR and voter participation, with some evidence to show that both registration and turnout rates are higher in states with motor voter laws (AVR specifically at the DMV) compared to states without those laws (Franklin and Grier 1997, Knack 1995, Toney 2021). Other research points to a more nuanced relationship between AVR policy and participation, with turnout increasing among particular groups in the electorate (Garnett 2022) and specifically among the eligible voting population (McGhee, Hill, and Romero 2021) following the adoption of an AVR policy. Considering the disagreement about the effect that a statewide AVR policy has on future participation in elections, this research reevaluates that relationship in the context of the 2022 midterms. Furthermore, very few studies have investigated how the method of AVR impacts voter participation and no studies have looked at this relationship beyond elections in 2020. Between 2020 and 2022, three additional states implemented AVR policies, signaling the need for an updated account of the relationship. This paper also provides the first look at the relationship between the AVR method and individual-level turnout in a non-presidential year.

In addition to contributing an updated account in a new context, this research is practically important as well. The number of states with AVR policies is increasing, up from two in 2016 to 25 in 2023. As more states begin to adopt AVR laws, they will be faced with a decision on whether and what type of AVR will be most impactful in their states. This research attempts to assist that decision-making process by evaluating how both the presence of AVR and method of AVR impact voter participation.

Background on AVR

The two methods of automatic voter registration currently utilized in the United States are front-end AVR and back-end AVR. Back-end AVR is a system in which individuals who visit the DMV or other government agencies (depending on state guidelines) are automatically registered to vote based on the information they provide to the agency. In this case, individuals are not asked whether they would like to register to vote at the point of service. Instead, they are automatically registered using the information, such as address and driver's license number, that is on record with the agency they visit. These individuals then receive a document in the mail asking if they would like to register with a specific party or if they would like to opt out of

¹ <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/automatic-voter-registration>

Table 1. List of States Who Have Enacted Automatic Voter Registration Laws as of 2022

Type of Automatic Voter Registration	States (20 Total)
Front-End AVR	Washington, West Virginia, Virginia, Rhode Island, Vermont, Nevada, New Mexico, New Jersey, Michigan, Maryland, Maine, Illinois, Hawaii, Georgia, Connecticut, California
Back-End AVR	Alaska, Colorado, Oregon, Massachusetts

their voter registration. Thus, with back-end AVR, potential voters are asked to opt-out of voter registration rather than opt-in. Conversely, in front-end AVR, potential voters decide if they would like to register to vote during an interaction at a government agency. In this instance, these individuals actively choose whether they would like to be registered to vote at the point of service. As of the 2022 midterm elections, four states had implemented back-end AVR, while 16 others had front-end policies (Table 1).

While front-end AVR is the more common practice, back-end has been heralded as the more progressive approach to expanding voter participation in the United States. Those opposed to back-end AVR maintain that the government should not be encroaching on individual agency by registering people to vote without first asking them.² Yet, others view back-end opt-out as the “gold standard for implementing AVR,” claiming this process provides the least burden on potential voters while still providing them with an option of whether or not to register.³

Politics of Automatic Voter Registration

Federal Level

The enactment of state-level AVR laws comes after years of debate in Congress following the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act over whether to reform voter registration processes in the United States. In response to remarkably low levels of voter turnout in the 1980s, federal lawmakers proposed a series of bills that would require state governments to simplify the voter registration process by providing voter registration opportunities at state agencies. After two failed attempts to provide this type of national voter registration reform, the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 was signed into law by President Clinton. The act had the goal of increasing participation in the democratic process by removing barriers to registration. While the 1993 law was passed with bipartisan support in both houses, the majority of those opposing the bill in the House were Republicans, and all the bill’s opponents in the Senate were Republicans, a partisan trend that is evident in state-level passage of AVR measures as well.⁴⁵ The primary arguments in favor of the bill were that it would increase electoral participation and lower the barrier to entry for disadvantaged groups. However, in addition to criticizing the bill for encroaching on states’ rights, providing a federal mandate without funding, and its perceived potential to promote election fraud, opponents of the bill also pushed back on the assumption that the bill would increase turnout. These opposing views were on display during the debate over the NVRA on the Senate floor. First, Senator McConnell (R-KY) claimed, “So, reason No. 2 to oppose this bill is that it will not be effective in increasing voter turnout. It may increase registration: it will not increase turnout” (CR 5228). On the other hand, Senator Kennedy (D-MA) stated, “For the 70 million eligible citizens who did not vote in the 1992 election, burdensome and unfair registration procedures are among the biggest obstacles to wider voter participation,” implying that with a less burdensome registration process, more could vote (CR 5224). Following from this debate, the first question assessed by this research will be: *what impact, if any, does automatic voter registration have on individual-level turnout?*

State Level

In Oregon, the nation’s first back-end AVR measure passed both houses on party-line votes before being signed into law by the Democratic governor, again signaling the partisan divide in support for the bill. Oregon Republicans opposed the measure because they feared sharing personal information between state agencies and county election officials would be an invasion of constituent privacy, as voter rolls are publicly available to view.⁶ In back-end AVR systems, the relevant information collected at a state agency like the DMV is automatically shared with local election officials. In front-end AVR, the potential voter actively chooses whether to register and thereby whether to share the information between the two agencies at the point of

²https://www.oregonlive.com/mapes/2015/02/automatic_voter_registration_b_1.html

³<https://newhampshirebulletin.com/2023/07/06/as-states-hunt-for-new-voters-massachusetts-adds-thousands-via-medio>

⁴<https://clerk.house.gov/evs/1993/roll026.xml>

⁵https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_votes/vote1031/vote_103_1_00038.htm

⁶https://www.oregonlive.com/mapes/2015/03/sweeping_new_motor_voter_bill.html

service. Other opponents at the state level note that automatic voter registration would lead to increased labor and costs for county election offices because of the increased number of registrants. Additionally, similar to the accusations made by George H.W. Bush when he vetoed a federal AVR measure, opponents of AVR at the state level claim that AVR measures lead to increased fraud by making it easier for noncitizens to vote.⁷⁸

Alternatively, proponents of AVR maintain that by removing registration barriers, AVR makes voting less costly and can have a positive effect on voter participation, especially for those who move frequently.⁹ Specifically, when the back-end AVR law was being debated in Massachusetts in 2018, Josh Zakim, the Boston City Councilor, stated, "It dramatically increases turnout, dramatically addresses issues of equity and access across demographics, and it's high time Massachusetts had it."¹⁰ According to Zakim, the back-end AVR process "dramatically increases turnout." Following from that, the second question addressed in this paper will be: *Does the method of AVR make a difference when it comes to turnout?*

Literature Review

Cost of Voting

In all states except for North Dakota, voting consists of a two-step process: registering to vote and then participating in an election, both of which require costly action on behalf of the potential voter. While policies vary by state, many Americans must seek out registration opportunities through avenues such as online registration, registration drives, or by visiting the relevant government agency. Similarly, there are barriers, including limited access to transportation, long wait times, and few voting opportunities outside of Election Day, that can keep people from casting their ballots. It has previously been established in the American political science literature that lowering the cost of voting through methods such as vote-by-mail (Karp and Banducci 2001), providing early voting opportunities (Richardson and Neeley 1996), or decreasing the distance to the nearest drop box (McGuire et al. 2020) increases turnout. In each of these instances, voting is made easier by removing barriers such as access to reliable transportation or limitations on when you can vote.

Cost of Registering to Vote

Part of the cost associated with voting in the United States comes from the process of registering to vote. Scholars have noted that there may be more costs involved in registering to vote than actually voting in the United States (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Also, the voter registration process in the United States may be part of the reason why the United States sees consistently lower turnout compared to other Western democracies that do not have as stringent registration requirements (Powell 1986). For instance, in both Canada and England, voters are registered via door-to-door censuses, putting the burden of registration on the state as opposed to the voter (Halperin 1999).

By evaluating U.S. counties before and after the adoption of registration requirements, Ansolabehere and Konisky (2006) show that requiring registration does lower turnout, adding further evidence to the literature outlining how increasingly arduous registration practices result in lower levels of turnout (see also Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978). Registration-related reforms, such as increasing the amount of time potential voters have to register or allowing for same-day registration, have been enacted by various states in order to encourage participation by combating high registration costs. States with earlier registration deadlines see lower levels of turnout compared to states with later deadlines to register (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Rhine 1995). Many voters become mobilized to participate in an election towards the end of the election season when the campaign is especially salient, but when many registration deadlines have already passed. Thus, having a later registration deadline can allow for the participation of those who are mobilized towards the end of the campaign. Similarly, studies of same-day registration have found that a hypothetical nationwide law allowing same-day registration could increase turnout as much as 5 percent (Fenster 1994). Similarly, Grumbach and Hill (2022) find that same-day registration increases turnout, especially among younger voters.

Automatic Voter Registration

Another reform focused on combating the high costs of registration in the United States is automatic voter registration (AVR). With AVR, the cost of registering to vote is lower, as individuals can register to vote at various state agencies that they already come into contact with, like the DMV. In line with the passage of the 1993 NVRA, researchers sought to evaluate the impact of "motor voter" laws on participation in U.S. elections, finding that both registration rates and turnout were higher in motor voter states (Franklin and Grier 1997, Knack 1995) and that the impact of these laws were higher for those who were moderately motivated to participate in politics (Highton and Wolfinger 1998). While much of the literature focuses on the period directly

⁷<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R40609.pdf>

⁸<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/09/23/veto-of-motor-voter-bill-sustained/94a25acc-1090-43f9-9460-a94d106c81d8/>

⁹https://www.oregonlive.com/mapes/2015/02/automatic_voter_registration_b_1.html

¹⁰<https://wbznewsradio.ihart.com/content/2018-06-27-ma-house-debates-automatic-voter-registration-bill>

after the passage of the NVRA, researchers have examined this relationship more recently as well, with mixed results. Scholars have shown that AVR increases turnout across the board (Toney 2021), among particular groups in the electorate (Garnett 2022), and among the eligible voting population (McGhee, Hill, and Romero 2021). Because the literature is inconclusive as to the exact impact of automatic voter registration policies on turnout, I intend to provide an updated account that incorporates the most recent data on statewide AVR policies, especially as the prevalence of these policies has grown in recent years.

- ***Policy Impact Hypothesis:*** I expect that individual-level turnout in the 2022 midterms will be higher in states with AVR policies compared to states without these policies, as automatic voter registration lowers the cost of registering to vote, thereby making the process of voting easier.

Method of Automatic Voter Registration (AVR)

While both methods of AVR are predicted to increase turnout rates due to the lowered cost of registration that comes with providing seamless and accessible registration options, it is not clear which method is more effective in promoting turnout. McGhee, Hill, and Romero (2021) evaluate the impact of AVR on both turnout and registration rates using state-level data from 2020. They disaggregate their results based on AVR type, ultimately showing that back-end AVR increases the registration rate and turnout rate among the eligible voting population to a larger degree than front-end AVR. Yet, the turnout rate among registered voters is lower in back-end AVR systems compared to front-end. Related to these seemingly contradictory findings, the authors write, “These systems increase registration quite rapidly, but also appear to add more voters who are less likely to vote.” (McGhee, Hill, and Romero 2021; 17). They acknowledge that front-end AVR systems require the most engagement among voters as these voters actively decide to register to vote. While this engagement results in lower registration rates, turnout is higher among the newly registered compared to back-end AVR systems, where we see higher registration rates, but lower turnout among the newly registered.

While their argument addresses the lack of awareness among voters who ‘register’ via back-end AVR, other scholars suggest that lowering the cost of voting through AVR may affect potential voter motivation. Erickson (1981) pushes back on the idea that automatic voter registration would increase turnout rates by outlining that those who undergo the process of registering to vote may be more likely to vote to protect the sunk cost of their registration efforts. In other words, individuals who have already gone through the trouble of registering might as well vote to make their registration efforts meaningful. Following that logic, individuals who do not actively register to vote (back-end AVR) may not feel the same level of inducement to vote as those who decide to register (front-end AVR).

Furthermore, in outlining her proposal for compulsory voting in the United States, Hill (2006) acknowledges that the greatest obstacle in the way of compulsory voting is America’s “deep-seated cultural and ideological aversion to state interference with individual autonomy” (221). While Americans would still be able to opt out of registering to vote in back-end systems, there may be some pushback from Americans on actions that limit their agency, such as being registered to vote automatically. As evidence of this, she points to the failure of a 1920s Oregon proposal that would have provided for compulsory registration and voting. Finally, Burden et. al (2014) found that expanding early voting opportunities can negatively impact turnout because there is less focus on mobilizing people to vote on Election Day through get-out-the-vote campaigns when other voting opportunities are available. The same could be true with automatic voter registration, especially back-end AVR where registration is particularly low cost. With back-end AVR, there may be less of a mobilizing effort to get people involved in electoral politics. With less emphasis and education on the importance of registering to vote because it is an automatic process, people may be less likely to become involved in politics and therefore less likely to vote even if they are registered.

Thus, there are two competing logics surrounding the effectiveness of the AVR method on voter participation reflected in the literature. First, because back-end AVR requires no additional effort or action on the part of the potential voter who visits a state agency, it is the lowest-cost method of registration. In line with the literature that shows that lowering the cost of registration increases turnout through methods such as extending registration deadlines or allowing for same-day registration, the less costly method (back-end AVR) should increase further participation. However, voters who register via back-end AVR are not required to engage in the electoral process to the degree that voters under other registration systems are because the registration process is automatic. Following from this, despite the back-end AVR being the least costly mode of registration,

- ***AVR Method Hypothesis:*** I anticipate that those who register via front-end AVR will be more likely to vote because of the higher level of engagement that such a process requires.

Data and Methods

In order to evaluate the impact of automatic voter registration on individual-level turnout in the 2022 midterm elections, I use the 2022 Cost of Voting Index (COVI), the 2022 CPS Voting Supplement from the Census Bureau’s data, and state election results and ballot measures for the 2022 election cycle.

Table 2. Coding Scheme for Type of AVR Policy

Model 1 (Impact of AVR Policy on Turnout) *Includes individuals in all states	States with a back-end AVR policy = 0 States with a front-end AVR policy = 1 States without an AVR policy = 2	58,958 observations
Model 2 (Impact of AVR Method on Turnout) *Only includes individuals who registered to vote via AVR	States with a back-end AVR policy = 0 States with a front-end AVR policy = 1	6,278 observations

Dependent Variable

My dependent variable is individual-level self-reported turnout from the Census Bureau's 2022 CPS Voting Supplement data. Specifically, the survey questions ask, "In any election, some people are not able to vote because they are sick or busy or have some other reason, and others do not want to vote. Did (you/name) vote in the election held on Tuesday, November 8, 2022?" (CPS Voter Supplement 2022). While prior research has identified that self-reported turnout is often overreported due to social desirability bias, the CPS Voter Supplement does not validate votes, which leaves self-reported data as the only option with this data (Burden 2000). However, the question is asked in a way that discourages social desirability bias to some extent. By prefacing the question with reasons individuals would be unable to vote, respondents may feel less pressure to state they voted because of the assurance that others also did not vote. While not perfect, this measure is better than simply asking if a respondent voted without any information about other voters or reasons why individuals abstain from voting. Additionally, the CPS has been referred to as the "canonical data set for the studies of election law and turnout" (Hill and Grumbach 2022, 410).

The turnout rate for the full sample studied here is 64%, while the turnout rate for the sample of voters who registered through either front or back-end AVR is 76%. Turnout among the second sample is likely higher because these are individuals in states who have, at a minimum, adopted AVR policies, but many also have other policies that make voting easier as well. Both rates are higher than the typical turnout in U.S. elections. However, the tendency to overreport turnout is not specific to the way in which individuals register to vote. Those who register via front-end opt out are no more likely than those who register via back-end opt out or another registration method to report that they voted. This means that while the turnout rate may be inflated, that inflation should be standard across all types of registration and should therefore not bias results. The turnout measure is coded as 1 if an individual said they voted and 0 otherwise.

Independent Variables

In the model assessing the overall impact of AVR on turnout, I include all states, coding states with back-end AVR as 0, front-end AVR as 1, and no AVR policy as 2, using the COVI data to classify states in each AVR category. In the AVR method model, I separated out the states that have back-end AVR (category 0) from those that allow front-end AVR through any agency (category 1 or 2) using a dummy variable. States that have adopted back-end AVR measures are coded as zero, while states that allow front-end AVR at state agencies are coded as one. The coding scheme is presented in Table 2 below. Because the research is focused on the effect of the mechanism through which people register to vote as opposed to the number of opportunities they have to register, including all states that have front-end AVR procedures, regardless of how widespread their opportunity for registration is (limited to DMV or more expansive), will not affect the results presented here.¹¹

¹¹Notably, both Delaware and North Dakota have been removed from the analysis. While both states score a 0 on the 2022 Cost of Voting Index, North Dakota was grouped into this category because they do not require voters to register at all, not because they have implemented a back end AVR system. In the case of Delaware, though the bill to establish a back-end AVR program was passed in 2021, the measure was not fully implemented statewide until summer of 2023. Because the measure was implemented after the 2022 congressional elections, I will not be able to include it in my analysis.

Control Variables

In order to isolate the effect of AVR on turnout, I am controlling for other variables that also affect whether a person turns out to vote. First, I control for the demographic variables that have been shown to affect the likelihood that an individual votes. Older, more educated, and richer individuals tend to vote at higher rates. In terms of race, white people are more likely to vote. Finally, women and married individuals typically turn out at higher rates.¹²

Beyond demographic variables, I am controlling for the presence of voting-related policies that would make it easier to vote for individuals in a given state. Laws that make voting less costly may increase turnout regardless of AVR policy status. Take voting by mail, for instance. Two of the back-end AVR states included in the analysis, Oregon and Colorado, conduct elections entirely by mail. In these states, all registered voters are sent a ballot in the mail. Thus, the cost of voting in a state like Oregon or Colorado is lower, regardless of the AVR policy status, because voters do not have to physically visit the polls, which affects turnout rates in these states (Karp and Banducci 2001). Following the same cost of voting logic, I will also control for policies that allow same-day registration (Grumbach and Hill, 2021) and early voting (Richardson and Neeley, 1996), as both have been shown to increase turnout. Election-related policies are coded 0 for the less restrictive policy, 1 for the more restrictive policy. For example, states with same-day registration are coded as 0, while states without same-day registration are coded as 1.

Finally, the last set of controls relates to state-specific election characteristics for the 2022 midterm elections. As noted by both scholars and news outlets, abortion was a factor that encouraged turnout in the 2022 midterms in response to the 2022 Supreme Court decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade* (Balogun and Okonofua 2023).¹³ I have identified those states that had abortion-related measures on the ballot with a binary variable coded as one if the state had an abortion measure and zero if it did not.¹⁴ Furthermore, I include a variable in the model to capture whether there was a ballot measure regarding the legalization of recreational drugs, with states that had a drug-related ballot measure coded as 1.¹⁵ Similar to abortion, the potential legalization of recreational drugs may serve as a mobilizing force for voters in a given state. Lastly, I include a variable indicating whether a state had a competitive statewide election. States that had a governor's race or Senate race (or both) that was within 10 percentage points are coded as 1, while states that did not have a competitive statewide race are coded as 0.¹⁶ According to Cox et al. (2019), competitiveness measures are typically based on the difference in vote shares between the winner and runner-up, which is also the way it is conceptualized here (169).

Models

Because the dependent variable is binary, I utilize logit models to represent the data. In order to evaluate the effect of an AVR policy on individual-level turnout, I employ two models. The first combines all states that have AVR (both front-end and back-end) and compares these states to those that do not have AVR policies (in the Appendix). The second model breaks the independent variable (AVR) up into three categories: back-end AVR, front-end AVR, and no AVR policy in order to see the effect on turnout across the AVR scale as opposed to just between AVR and non-AVR states. In the final model, I evaluate the impact of the AVR method on turnout. To do so, I compare individual-level turnout among voters who registered through front-end AVR as opposed to those who registered by back-end AVR.

Crucially, the CPS voting supplement includes a question regarding how an individual registered to vote. In order to measure the effect of AVR registration type on turnout, it is essential that I am able to disentangle voters who registered to vote at a state government agency from those in AVR states who registered to vote in other ways, such as through registration drives, online, or by mail. The survey asks, "There are various places and ways people can register to vote. The last time (you/name) registered, how did (you/name) register to vote?" (CPS Voter Supplement 2022). The first two answers to this question are at a DMV or at a public assistance agency. Thus, I use this question to separate voters in AVR states who did and did not register at state agencies, keeping only those who registered through AVR in the analysis for my final model.

Ultimately, this leads to 1,096 survey participants who registered at the DMV or another state agency in one of the four back-end AVR states (Alaska, Colorado, Oregon, and Massachusetts) and 5,246 survey participants who registered at the DMV or another state agency in one of the 16 front-end AVR states.¹⁷ In the model that evaluates the overall effect of AVR

¹²<https://www.prb.org/resources/who-votes-in-america/>

¹³<https://www.npr.org/2022/11/25/1139040227/abortion-midterm-elections-2022-republicans-democrats-roe-dobbs>

¹⁴https://ballotpedia.org/2022_ballot_measures; Three states in the dataset had abortion-related ballot measures. California voters voted to add reproductive freedom to the California Constitution, Michigan voters voted to provide the right to reproductive freedom per the state constitution, and voters in Vermont approved an amendment that claimed that "personal reproductive autonomy is central to the liberty and dignity to determine one's own life course."

¹⁵Maryland voted to legalize marijuana use for people over the age of 21 while Colorado voted to legalize the use of hallucinogens.

¹⁶States who had both a competitive Senate and a competitive governor's race are also coded as 1. States who did not have a statewide race at all were coded as 0.

¹⁷The smaller sample from back-end states is likely the case for two reasons. First, there are more survey participants in the front-end AVR category simply because there are more states that have implemented front-end AVR policies. Also, because individuals who register through back-end AVR do not physically register at a government agency and instead receive a mailer indicating their registration following a visit to the agency, these individuals may not be aware of where they registered.

Table 3. Impact of AVR Policy on Individual-Level Turnout

Variable	Estimate	Standard Error
avr	-0.175***	0.0193
early vote	0.091***	0.0247
vote by mail	-0.022	0.0328
same day reg	-0.097***	0.0240
abortion	0.275***	0.0335
drugs	0.128***	0.0376
compet	0.326***	0.0229
age	0.036***	0.000
marital	0.057***	0.0050
edu	0.236***	0.0044
race	-0.067***	0.0070
gender	0.020	0.0191
fam inc	0.076***	0.0029

on individual-level turnout, the majority of survey respondents are considered, as nearly all states fall into one of the three categories: no AVR, front-end AVR, or back-end AVR.

Results

Impact of AVR Policy on Individual-Level Turnout

First and most notably, the AVR variable is negative and statistically significant. Substantively, this means that individual-level turnout decreases across the range of AVR policies, with turnout being the highest in states with back-end AVR, followed by states with front-end AVR, and finally, individual-level turnout is lowest in states without any form of AVR. The probability of an individual voting in a state with back-end AVR is 67.3%, compared to 63.3% in states with front-end AVR, and 59.2% in states that do not allow AVR.¹⁸ In terms of comparison to other methods aimed at lowering the cost of registration, AVR has a larger impact. The probability of an individual voting in a state with same-day registration is 61.8% compared to 59.5% for someone in a state without same-day registration. This translates to a 2.3% increase in turnout with the addition of a same-day registration policy. To compare, having access to a front-end AVR policy increased turnout among individuals by 4.1% in the 2022 midterms. This result is confirmed in the model that compares states with any type of AVR to states without AVR. In this model, the probability of an individual voting in a state with AVR is 63.2% compared to 59.5% in a state without access to AVR (see the Appendix).

The demographic controls are in line with expectations. Older, more educated, and wealthier individuals were more likely to vote in the 2022 midterm elections. White people and individuals who are married were also more likely to vote. In this particular case, there was not a statistically distinguishable difference in turnout between men and women. For the voting policy controls, the less restrictive policy (i.e., a state has same-day registration) is coded as zero, with the decision to vote coded as 1. Thus, we should expect to see a negative relationship between the voting policy controls and turnout, as less restrictive policies should promote turnout. In line with this expectation, individuals in states that have same-day registration policies are more likely to vote compared to their counterparts in states that do not have same-day registration policies. The early vote variable is statistically significant, but in the opposite direction of what we would expect based on the lowered cost of voting that comes with providing additional opportunities to vote. However, as Burden et al. (2014) note in their work, early voting can have a negative impact on turnout, as there is less focus on mobilizing voters through initiatives such as "get out the vote" campaigns in states with multiple election days. Lastly, the all-mail voting variable does not reach statistical significance, though it is directionally in line with the prediction that increasing access to the ballot should promote turnout. This unusual finding may be a result of the analysis of only one election here (the 2022 midterms).

The controls for statewide election characteristics are also in line with what was predicted. Individuals were more likely to turn out in states where abortion was on the ballot, where they had the potential to vote for or against the legalization of recreational drugs, and in states where there was a Senate or governor's race that was within 10 percentage points.¹⁹

¹⁸These predicted probabilities are based on values for a typical observation in the data. The following values are used: mean age, median marital status, median education level, modal race category, modal gender, median income level, and modal values for all of the dichotomous ballot measure variables and other voting policy variables.

¹⁹The race estimate has a p-value of 0.050816, while the abortion variable has an estimate of 0.0657, both of which are very close to the conventional level of statistical significance.

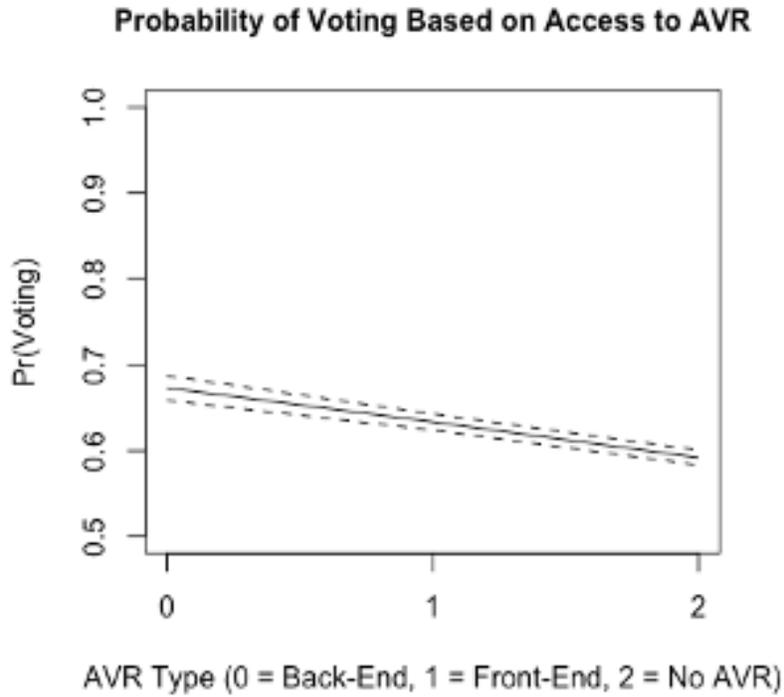


Figure 1. Probability of Voting Based on Access to AVR

Table 4. Impact of AVR Method on Individual-Level Turnout

Variable	Estimate	Standard Error
avr	-0.047	0.1064
early vote	0.450***	0.1278
vote by mail	-0.191***	0.0867
same day reg	-0.102	0.0794
abortion	0.193	0.1049
drugs	0.692***	0.1427
compet	0.590***	0.0901
age	0.035***	0.0022
marital	0.023	0.0161
edu	0.169***	0.0147
race	-0.036	0.0184
gender	0.081	0.0638
fam inc	0.084***	0.010

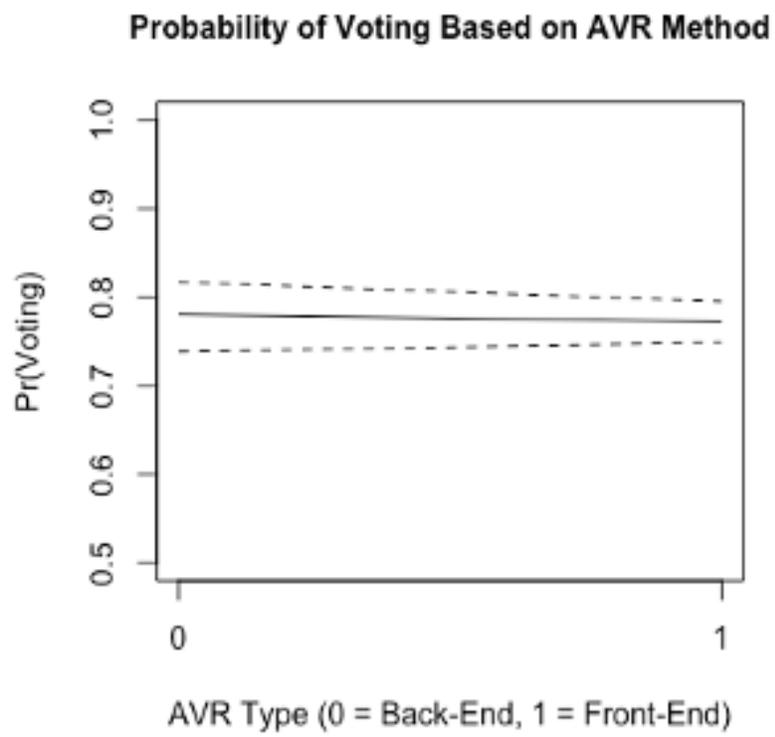


Figure 2. Probability of Voting Based on AVR Method

The final model evaluates the impact of the type of AVR on individual-level turnout among individuals who registered through either front-end AVR or back-end AVR. Essentially, the difference between the two AVR methods on the likelihood of turning out to vote is negligible. The probability that an individual will vote if they have registered via back-end AVR is 78.0% compared to 77.2% for an individual who registered via front-end AVR. The AVR variable indicating whether an individual registered via front-end or back-end AVR is not statistically significant.

In terms of the election policy variables, all are in the expected direction. Similar to the first model, individuals in states without access to early voting are more likely to vote than those with early voting opportunities. The coefficient is negative on both the same-day registration variable and the all-mail voting variable. In this model, those who had access to vote by mail were more likely to vote in the 2022 midterms. While not significant, the same-day registration variable is directionally in line with the prediction that increasing registration accessibility will result in higher levels of turnout. Again, the lack of significance of that variable may be a result of investigating a subset of voters who registered via AVR in one midterm election cycle.

Similar to the first model, the controls are in line with what was expected in the majority of cases. Demographically, older, richer, and more educated individuals are more likely to vote. Among the individuals who registered to vote via AVR, men and women participate at similar rates. Though the marital status variable is in the expected direction, it is not significant, indicating that there is no difference in turnout rates among individuals who are married and not married. In terms of the statewide election-related controls, individuals in states that had statewide elections within 10 percentage points are more likely to turn out. For the ballot measures, individuals in states with ballot measures related to legalizing recreational drugs were more likely to vote, while people with abortion on the ballot were more likely to vote based on the direction of the coefficient, but not to a statistically significant degree.

Conclusion

First, in the context of the 2022 midterm elections, individuals in states with an AVR policy were more likely to vote compared to those in states that have not adopted AVR policies. In regard to the debate between members of Congress, it seems that increasing the ease with which people can register to vote does have a positive impact on turnout. However, the claim by the Boston city official that turnout is dramatically increased with back-end AVR systems is not consistent with the data investigated here. While there is literature to support the assertion that back-end AVR is a more effective method at promoting turnout because of the lowered cost of registration, there is also relevant literature that bolsters the argument that voters who do not actively choose to register may not be as likely to participate in the electoral process down the road.

While not statistically significant in both cases, these results demonstrate that AVR policies are important for two reasons. First, automatic voter registration policies can promote turnout. However, the type of AVR does not exert an independent or significant effect on turnout. Practically speaking, the evidence that this type of AVR does not affect the decision to turn out should be reassuring to voting rights activists and legislators who hope their states will adopt AVR policies. As noted in the introduction, back-end AVR policies have been controversial among lawmakers due to the sharing of private information among agencies, the cost to local election offices, and the potential for voter fraud. In front-end AVR, people are actively choosing to provide a state agency with their information. Also, the monetary cost of implementation is lower in front-end AVR states because there are fewer total registrations compared to back-end AVR, where everyone who visits a participating state agency is registered. Because the difference in turnout is not substantial between the two systems, states could push for the less divisive type of automatic voter registration, front-end AVR, without much loss in terms of voter participation.

Further research should continue to inspect this relationship as automatic voter turnout spreads to other states in the coming years. Minnesota, New York, Delaware, and Pennsylvania will have fully implemented their AVR systems in time for the 2024 presidential primary and general elections. Because of the recent changes to laws in these states, it would be possible to do a pre- and post-comparison of turnout in states that have recently adopted AVR measures. Also, it is possible that some states that have previously adopted front-end AVR will expand their systems to allow for back-end AVR. In that case, researchers could investigate how the change from one system to the other impacts turnout as opposed to starting from a baseline of no automatic voter registration. Finally, though comparing front-end registration processes to back-end registration processes is a logical first step, it is likely that the way in which states administer AVR policies is different across the United States. Because of that reality, it may be worthwhile to further divide front-end AVR into categories based on factors such as how the question regarding voter registration is posed (i.e., from an employee or through paperwork) or how much support is offered to assist potential voters who come to a state agency.

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Appendix

Table 5. Caption

Variable	Estimate	Standard Error
avr	-0.157***	0.0262
early vote	0.078***	0.0251
vote by mail	-0.057	0.0325
same day reg	-0.100***	0.0254
abortion	0.256***	0.0341
drugs	0.146***	0.0375
compet	0.332***	0.0230
age	0.036***	0.0006
marital	0.056***	0.0050
edu	0.236***	0.0044
race	-0.068***	0.0070
gender	0.020	0.0191
fam inc	0.077***	0.0029

20

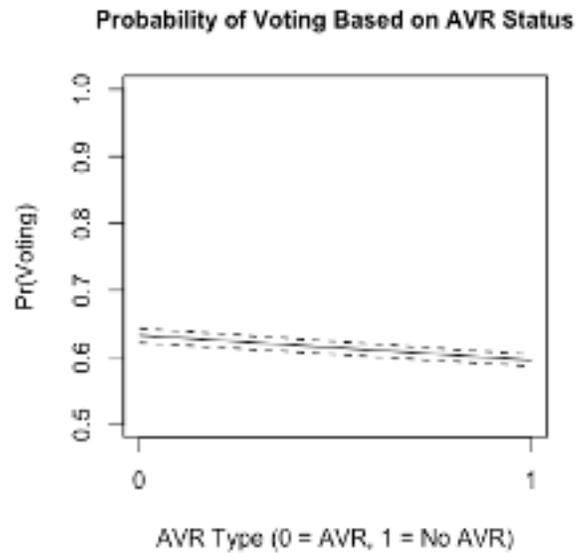


Figure 3. Probability of Voting Based on AVR Status

²⁰P value on the vote by mail variable is 0.0810.

The Challenges of Undergraduate Research Methods Education in Political Science

Tracy Lightcap¹

¹Department of Political Science, LaGrange College, tlightcap@lagrange.edu

ABSTRACT

Deciding on the parameters of courses in research methods in undergraduate education in political science is a perennial challenge. This challenge has become even more the case recently. In this article, I first describe the rapid changes in the social sciences that impact present methods courses. I then turn to three challenges—the data revolution, new data analysis environments, and the credibility revolution—that now await those who are designing methods courses for undergraduates. I offer some qualitative evidence concerning how subjects touching on the three challenges are being met in present courses, then proceed to suggestions concerning how methods courses could address the challenges based on my own experiences. I conclude with thoughts on how the challenges and their integration into research methods courses and program curricula can help undergraduate students acquire the mastery they need for both further study and work.

Introduction

In recent years, the entire world of the social sciences has been turned upside down by a data revolution. First, the availability of massive new datasets has converted what were theory-heavy disciplines with limited data to data-heavy disciplines with ample resources to test models. The advent of datasets including entire populations has greatly reduced the problem of representativeness. The use of computerized data drawn from electronic sources has exploded. The advent of new sources based on satellite imagery has created new avenues for analysis.¹ Replication has become a discipline-wide concern, leading to immense collections of data from ongoing studies. New methods of data management have vastly increased the amount of data available and changed methods of accessing and analyzing it. This has not diminished the role of surveys and aggregate data; instead, it has greatly expanded the possibilities for both. For political science research, this has meant entirely new areas of study opening as data increases in depth and availability. For teaching, the barrier of obtaining curated, structured data for use in methods courses has largely disappeared (Gill 2021, King 2011).

Second, the availability of sophisticated data analysis applications at low or no cost has combined with these new data environments and global computer networks to make opportunities for political science research much more widespread. The traditional picture of the political scientist as a lone scholar doing desk studies in his or her office is being supplemented by the use of research teams brought together by similar interests and often extending beyond any single campus. The proliferation of new data for research, often with open access, has meant a burgeoning of new sources for study (King 2014). The impact of these opportunities on research methods courses and across political science courses in general has yet to be fully realized, but the changes already in place are dramatic (King 2011). For teaching, the cost barrier of obtaining the analytical software needed for methods courses has been greatly lowered.

Third, new research into the use of causal analysis in non-experimental studies applied to larger datasets has made the development of general findings in the social sciences a much more realistic expectation. These trends have been accompanied by a surge of new research concerns concerning causal analysis and by a new emphasis on replication of research results. Combining and successfully exploiting the opportunities of these trends calls for research energy and methodological sophistication not seen previously (Angrist and Pischke 2010). It also presents challenges to pedagogy in political science on a whole new order of difficulty, especially in basic courses on research methods (Wuttke 2019).

Below, I will examine how to build and extend basic research literacy concerning these challenges using research methods courses for undergraduate students in political science. Such courses should help prepare students to face research opportunities if they choose to go on to advanced studies, and find productive work using their skills if they do not. But the courses should also include introducing students to the challenges in present and future research and in public environments for research as well. The study proceeds by further describing each of the three waves of change referenced above. I then present an overview of the present treatment of the challenges in existing courses based on analyzing a small sample of research methods course

¹ For instance, King (2011) points out, doubtful economic development statistics from developing countries can now be replaced by data from satellite imagery.

syllabi, and provide examples of possible avenues for including the challenges in basic research methods courses, using my own teaching experience. I end by offering some conclusions concerning how attention to the three challenges could prove valuable to practitioners in political science and on the need for further research on how to integrate the challenges into methods courses and political science programs.

Three Challenges

The Data Revolution

The World Bank's open data site now features 7,032 open datasets, comprising both surveys and aggregate data files that can be downloaded for use by anyone (World Bank, 2024). Harvard's Dataverse site has over 2000 "dataverses," i.e., sites where data can be accessed on various subjects containing over 75000 datasets, most of them either open source or available on request (Harvard Dataverse 2024).² The American National Election Studies site has more than 70 datasets concerning the American national elections readily available after a free registration (ANES 2024). There are countless other examples that I could cite. Further, many organizations now provide extensive online analytical tools that can be used to mine datasets and download the results for further work.³

Previously, getting the data necessary for performing even limited research in methods classes was a major barrier to course content. Unless an institution was willing to join one of the research consortia or buy datasets directly, the availability of data for teaching purposes was often a matter of re-creating entire datasets by typing them into spreadsheets by hand.⁴ This is obviously no longer the case. Given the availability of well-archived data, developing datasets for either personal research or for pedagogical purposes has become much easier. Further, there has been a sea change in the character of the data on offer. Instead of limited cross-sectional aggregate data and one-off surveys, it is common to see "Big Data" – datasets of immense size and complexity extending over multiple years and including highly disaggregated raw data sometimes covering entire populations (Grossman and Pedahzur 2020, Best and Mallinson 2024). Continuing surveys have also made much of their data online in annual datasets (for example, see European Commission 2024). There are also several inexpensive new ways to conduct surveys online that greatly increase the opportunities of students to become involved in medium to large-scale survey research (SurveyMonkey, Mechanical Turk). In short, the barriers to entry for research data used in both courses and active research have been greatly lowered.

There are differences in the capability of collegiate institutions to manage this open fire hose of data and in how much those capabilities can be used for undergraduate courses. The data management resources and expertise of "R1" universities are, as might be expected, mainly focused on higher-level research. This does not mean that information technology assistance is not available, far from it. There is support for undergraduate research, but the focus of many programs is on advanced students, usually in their last semesters of schooling. It is rather that aid in putting basic undergraduate research methods courses together is not a priority and is left largely to the instructors of such courses. This lower priority is also the case in other institutions. Often, political science programs do not have methods requirements for undergraduates (Parker 2010). Ishiyama (2019) has found that research methods requirements are tied to the level of structure in political science programs; those with capstone courses are more likely to require methods courses. But whether required or elective, it is basic courses in research methods that are important for undergraduate political science education at all these institutions. Often, the basic methods course is all the research experience in political science that students receive. How should the revolution in data availability be addressed in these courses?

New Data Analysis Environments

The new data analysis applications available have greatly lowered the second great barrier to research literacy: the cost of acquiring the means—i.e., the statistical analysis applications—to conduct research. The usual problem in the past was the prohibitively expensive licenses for fully capable applications. The choice was a stark one: either pay for licenses covering a small proportion of the available computer stations, often with applications with a crippled subset of routines that had to be supplemented with additional packages for more money, or get students to buy even more truncated "student" versions of software with limits that precluded analysis of datasets of even moderate size. This situation has now changed with the proliferation of open-source statistical applications of unprecedented power and the development of more comprehensive commercial applications with licensing terms that help justify their price tag. Similar developments on the qualitative side have also appeared (Best and Mallinson 2024).

²These figures represent substantial, almost geometric increases in recent years. There has been a 20% increase in the Dataverse datasets since 2016, for instance. It is revealing that the Dataverse no longer shows exact numbers of files in the datasets; it is "... greater than 181,500" (Harvard Dataverse 2024).

³The World Bank, for instance, has a variety of sophisticated online data manipulation tools that can be used to refine and analyze its open files and save the results (World Bank 2024).

⁴I did this myself several times in my early teaching career.

There are tradeoffs here, of course. Learning to use *R*, the most widely adopted open source statistical and graphic presentation language, is an ongoing challenge due to the continuing extensions of the application and because the availability of basic texts using *R* for political science methods courses is limited.⁵ This obstacle can be a challenge to overcome, despite the development of open source windowing systems (*R Commander*, *Jamovi*, *BlueSky Statistics*, and *JASP*) that make *R* much easier to use in introductory courses.⁶ Of course, if sound, comprehensive commercial software is available (*Stata* and *SPSS* appear to be the usual choices), there is no reason not to prefer that to most open source programs; the level of support is still better than what is found for open source applications, and the techniques supported are copious. The open-source programs also require a greater effort for students (and their instructors) to learn. The price, however, is right; governments, private businesses, and academic environments are moving in the direction of open-source applications, and the research skills of students must move with them (Muenchen 2023). But are these choices optimal for improving the skills of students in basic research methods courses?

The Credibility Revolution

The final challenge to be addressed is the “credibility revolution.” This has several aspects to it. First and foremost is the need to be more careful about establishing causal relationships in non-experimental studies. This concern has driven an increase in designed studies that can incorporate experiments or the analysis of “natural” and quasi-experiments. The use of causal inference in strictly observational studies is also involved, especially in the use of matching designs for “before/after” combined datasets (Angrist and Pischke 2010, 2015). The increasing use of counterfactual reasoning (the “Rubin causal model”) for analyzing observational data is tied to these considerations as well (Morgan and Winship 2015). Another aspect of this is the increasingly widespread use of resampling techniques in observational studies using massive datasets (Good 1999).

The second trend involves more care in making assumptions about data. Here, the main question involves the continuing disputes over frequentist or “error-statistical” and Bayesian interpretations of inference (Mayo and Spanos 2011, Mayo 2018, 2023, Gelman and Shalizi 2012). Some of the new work on causal inference in philosophy, while not something that should be a major concern in introductory courses, should be carefully considered in constructing them as well (Scheines 1997).⁷

Addressing the credibility revolution is probably the most difficult area of inculcating research literacy; much of the subject matter is beyond the scope of basic methods courses in political science. It may be the most important, however, in both justifying political science as a discipline and in providing students with skills for citizenship. An ability to discern specious arguments and demand better explanations from both authorities, commentators, and fellow citizens is more necessary than ever for active citizenship in an increasingly dense and complex social environment. The capacity to conduct and evaluate valid research is also an increasingly valuable skill set in economies based on service and global in scope. How should such complex, but important, ideas be introduced?

Evidence From the Field: Political Science Syllabi and the Three Challenges

Research methods have been seen as a major component of political science programs for some time (Ishiyama 2005a, Thies and Hogan 2005, Gordon et al. 2009). Examinations of the actual content of methods courses are less common (Turner and Thies 2009, Lam and Hung 2024). Calling for the recognition of these three challenges raises a central question: Have the challenges been recognized or addressed in research methods courses? To begin to answer this question, I conducted an examination of a small sample of existing research methods courses’ syllabi. Syllabi are increasingly recognized as sources for learning how courses are structured and as contracts of a sort between the institution, the instructor, and the students themselves. As such, they can reveal many aspects of how courses deliver teaching that meets course goals (Slatterly and Carlson 2005).

I selected the sample of 17 syllabi from research methods courses collected by Edwards (2025) between 2010 and 2024.⁸ This sample is not random, but it has several useful characteristics: all courses use the same text, the sample spans 14 years (2010-2024), different software applications are used, school sizes vary (although large public institutions predominate), and paper requirements differ. While not representative enough for inferential purposes, the cases are adequate for an exploratory qualitative analysis.

For coding the syllabi, I used coarsened categories for determining whether the syllabus in question indirectly addressed the three revolutions (Lam and Hung 2024). These are:

⁵But see Llaudet and Imai (2023) or Pollock and Edwards (2022). There are several other options.

⁶The *R Commander* (Fox, J., M.M. Marquez, M. Bouchet-Valat 2024) is probably the most widely supported of these, given that it is an *R* library with 35 “plugin” additions that can be accessed within the *Commander*. *JASP* (2024) is especially accommodating to Bayesian analysis. *Jamovi* (The Jamovi Foundation 2024) is *R*-based, exceptionally complete, and has an active user community that supplements the original program regularly. A version running on the cloud is also available. Finally, *BlueSky Statistics* (BlueSky Statistics 2024) is exceptionally complete as well though it has some installation problems that have yet to be addressed.

⁷Here, the cross-platform causal analysis application *Tetrad* (Carnegie Mellon University 2024) is quite useful, albeit only for advanced courses.

⁸Edward’s listing of courses includes one that has since been eliminated by the program.

Table 1. Table 1: The Three Challenges in Research Methods Syllabi, 2010 - 2024

University	Paper Required?	Data Management?	Open Source Application?	Causality/ Research Design?
University 1	Yes			Yes
University 2	Yes		Yes	Yes
University 3	Yes			
University 4	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
University 5				Yes
University 6		Yes	Yes	Yes
University 7			Yes	
University 8	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
University 9	Yes	Yes		
University 10	Yes			Yes
University 11				Yes
University 12	Yes	Yes		
University 13	Yes		Yes	Yes
University 14	Yes		Yes	Yes
University 15	Yes	Yes		Yes
University 16	Yes			Yes
University 17		Yes		
N=17	71%	42%	42%	71%

1. The data revolution: the syllabus has sections or laboratory sessions addressing dataset selection and management, or examination of questions involving data validity using actual datasets.
2. New data analysis environments: the syllabus specifies the use of an open-source data analysis application, either alone or in combination with commercial software.
3. The credibility revolution: the syllabus has sections that specifically address both causality and research design. In addition to specific references, this can include sections treating experimental design and its connection to causal reasoning, statistical control of confounders, and sections on how to design research projects. Both causality and research design sections should be found to code a syllabus positively.

As mentioned above, these descriptions are not exact enough to cover all aspects of the three challenges. They should suffice for coding the syllabi to meet the limited purpose of determining the extent of coverage of topics connected to the challenges (Lo and Hung 2024).

Table 1 below shows the results of the analysis. As might be expected, the bulk of the sections in each syllabus was concerned with delivering a base course in frequentist statistics. Since all courses use the same book—Pollock and Edwards’s *The Essentials of Political Analysis* (2024)—this is no surprise. Sections on positivist scientific methods, statistical inference, hypothesis testing, contingency tables, bivariate regression, and multiple regression can be found in all the syllabi; the only difference is the statistical application used and coverage of extensions of regression (58% of the syllabi). The syllabi selected also have sections that cover aspects of the three challenges, but in differing proportions. Specific data management sections and the use of open-source statistical applications are less common (42%) than sections on causality and research design (71%), despite the more stringent requirements for this category. I arranged the cases in descending time order in Table 1. Time does seem to have one effect: syllabi generated at later times are more likely to use open-source statistical applications. This is consistent with the widening acceptance of such applications and their increasing use in comparison to commercial options (Muenchen 2023). It is also gratifying to find that research papers are so widely required and that sections on causality and research design are so prevalent. While not specifically recognized, the groundwork for consideration of all the challenges is apparent.

Suggestions on How to Incorporate the Three Challenges into Introductory Political Science Research Methods Courses

The results above are useful for the limited purpose of determining whether topics involving aspects of the three challenges are considered in research methods courses, but they are lacking in detail. The incorporation of the challenges in courses obviously requires more than a section in a syllabus to be effective. Given what I have said so far, how do I think undergraduate research methods courses should be taught to ensure the challenges are addressed? Below, I am going to suggest some approaches I have used that might help address the challenges. I will not go beyond my own experience in describing these options; there are no claims to generality in what follows. Examples of the course syllabi and some other materials can be found in the supplement to this article.

To address *the data revolution*, I have used two avenues. First, the course requires students to answer a particular research question using a variety of pre-selected datasets or data of their own selection. One of the difficulties with using the vast new datasets is choosing one. Centering the course around research questions chosen by the students themselves allows exposure to new online resources to be limited and focused. Students are introduced to using computers to find data that can be used to answer their questions. I allowed them to either use the existing datasets I made available or to find what they needed in other sources. Explanations of why data is the overwhelmingly important factor in doing any analysis of a research question accompanied this and were tied to explanations of how to answer scientific questions. Scaffolding students in their choice of data and the considerations involved in data models takes a good deal of judgment at the initial step.⁹ A research question that is too difficult to engage can demoralize students. Further, the questions had to be of sufficient interest to keep the students engaged during the course and to make finishing their final assignments worthwhile. That, in turn, takes a considerable amount of prior research by instructors so that the datasets available for download are sufficiently finished that drastic levels of data preparation would not be needed.¹⁰ Once the data is downloaded, the research question can be broken into subsidiary questions for either team or (more useful in my experience) individual assignments and projects. This strategy has the advantage of forcing interaction with available data sources, but may forfeit the immediacy of applying techniques to create and analyze data concerning more concrete problems.¹¹

The second approach I used was aimed at answering questions involving community interests. Using pre-selected data sources that answer a variety of questions without requiring much further effort by users can disconnect research from the realities of data collection and preparation; the process of dataset construction and its relevance to research may become too opaque. To address this problem, I organized courses around a community research project done for a local organization or group. The class was built around collecting and analyzing data concerning questions of actual community concern.¹² The data were collected using systematic random samples of existing court records or community telephone surveys. This approach had the advantage of exposing students to the rough-and-tumble of real research projects, complete with the attendant problems of data cleaning and analysis. After the data was collected, the class was split into teams responsible for analyzing aspects of the projects as part of an overall presentation to the clients who asked for the analysis. Such courses have the disadvantage of not guaranteeing that students are exposed to the problems of working with the new data sources online. There is also the drawback of compressing the available time in the semester to go over more advanced statistical techniques; data collection and preparation lead to problems and absorb time. This design does provide students with a realistic experience in how data sources are developed and what is necessary to present valid results. This leads to an appreciation of the effort that goes into the ongoing research projects that produce the online data they can use and a strong appreciation for the interaction between primary, experimental, and data models in research (Mayo 1996). This has proved useful in the more advanced projects our program required in our senior capstone seminar. Such service-learning projects also improve community engagement by

⁹I have found that using Mayo's (1996) framework of primary models, experimental models and data models is very useful. Concentrating on the different models needed at different stages in research and, especially, the interaction between each as research continues does much to acclimate students the necessary flexibility of the scientific method. My requirement that all students watch the motion picture *Chinatown* also reinforced the need for an interaction between exploratory and confirmatory models and for alertness to how changing evidence can change research questions as investigation continues.

¹⁰For datasets I made available for courses I favored those that require some manipulation and transformation of data for analysis, but this is a personal preference. Of course, selection becomes especially important if the student chooses a dataset not in the initial collection available. Here instructors have an additional obligation to help students make choices within the limits of the course. Making choices of research questions determined by limitations of time and resources is an especially useful lesson for students going forward.

¹¹It can also help to personalize research questions. This can help defeat the use of "AI" to complete papers. For a more complete treatment of this strategy see Evans (2025).

¹²The projects that I used involved specific requests by community organizations. In one project the Drug Court of Troup County asked for an evaluation of their program. This involved building a database that compared recidivism records of defendants from the new drug court program with drug offenders tried in the State Court of Troup County before the Drug Court was established and another dataset assembled by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The other projects—there was more than one—involved random telephone surveys of several neighborhoods and the city of LaGrange for non-profit organizations. The students developed the surveys using subsets of questions from the Social Capital Community Survey (Putnam, 2019). The class worked up the survey script for the ensuing data collection effort.

students after their academic careers are finished (Robinson 2000, Morgan and Streb 2001).¹³

To deal with *new data environments*, available open-source statistical applications should be strongly considered. In the syllabi examined above, *R*, often in combination with the integrative development environment *RStudio*, was a common choice. Those whose experience is with *SPSS* should consider using its open-source clone, *PSPP*, as at least a supplement to the installed applications at their campuses (The Free Software Foundation 2024).¹⁴ These options will require some help in many instances to overcome installation problems for the students. That also proved a useful lesson. Of course, using open-source applications will depend on the installed base of statistical applications at particular campuses; as I said above, there are good arguments for using locally supported commercial software. The flexibility that open-source applications can give students, however, can prove extremely useful both to instructors and students.¹⁵

As a possible model for using open-source languages in courses, I again use my own experience. I began using *R* and the *R Commander* windowing package in my research methods course in 2013 (The R Foundation 2024, Fox, M.M. Marquez, and M. Bouchet-Valat 2024). I have found that there were many advantages to this approach. First, the software is free and can be downloaded by the students themselves with some assistance. As a result, everyone had the application necessary for both short and long assignments, greatly increasing the amount of time they had to do their work and, conversely, the kind of detail I could expect them to absorb about professional writing and presentation. Since *R* is the gold standard in computer-generated graphics, the appearance of this part of their work vastly improved as well.¹⁶ I required professionally prepared tables and graphs and penalized any effort using copies of computer output as a substitute. This approach required a much earlier introduction of the use of computers and a substantial amount of scaffolding to get students over their initial anxiety (Li 2019). The final assignments—I required a short research note—were an improvement over past performance.¹⁷

Considering *the credibility revolution* roiling through political science in detail is beyond the scope of any basic research methods course. I think, however, that a through explanation of simple causal models should be introduced into courses as early as possible. I have found that three variable models are sufficient for introductory courses, but I now treat such models as directed acyclic graphs (DAGs). Again, I will turn to my own experience.

Recently, I was an adjunct at the political science department of an R1 university, teaching their required research methods course. The departmental curriculum for the course required a paper showing some research skill for successful completion, and any methods course requires some engagement with actual data. Unfortunately, many of the students did not have any computer resources beyond their cell phones and had obligations that precluded regular visits to the university's computer laboratories.¹⁸ I used the online data analysis application *WebCHIP*, a simple table generator that I had used in other courses. *WebCHIP* can be used on any device with an internet connection.¹⁹ The application produces tabular results that can be used to make graphs of relationships. The course was built around homework tied to tables generated by the program and graphic presentations of the relationships themselves.²⁰ In order to make this clearer in class sessions, I used simple three-variable DAGs. I found this a useful approach. Students did not get the experience of using advanced techniques—I covered multiple regression in lectures alone, though I tied the statistical controls in multiple regression to DAGs as well—but they did become more capable in analyzing causal linkages and benefited from class discussions of the assignments. I found that the reasoning behind controls, what they are, how they work, and why they are useful is easier to get across once the basics of DAGs have been absorbed (Scheines 1997, Morgan and Winship 2014). Their final papers showed they had learned basic causal thinking.

Finally, in some courses, I tried to get my students to understand the use of identification in testing causal relationships. I used two ways to introduce it, depending on the class involved. In some classes, I used multiple regression models with one or two controls and showed the differences between estimates before and after introducing control variables. In others, I have used categorical variables to divide datasets, then run separate regressions testing the research hypothesis on the subsets of the data. Both are instances of the simplest kind of regression specification to test hypotheses, and in both cases, the consistency (or lack thereof) of regression coefficients over different specifications was emphasized. In addition, when I have discussed regression models at whatever level of complexity, I have emphasized graphic analysis and basic regression diagnostics and tied these to regression assumptions (Fife 2020). This is not equivalent to addressing the credibility revolution, but it does start students on the first step in understanding why designed and tested models are necessary to make useful statements about

¹³ Several students who took these courses later pursued careers in either public service or non-profit organizations.

¹⁴ This application is virtually identical to the base *SPSS* package except in some of its graphic capabilities. I have used it effectively in courses as a supplement/replacement for *SPSS*. University 4 in the syllabi collection also used this option.

¹⁵ For an overview of all open-source options for statistical applications see Nui et al. (2021).

¹⁶ Hadley Wickham's *ggplot2* package for *R* (2016) was used with success. There is now a *ggplot2* plugin for the *R Commander* (Nagashima 2024).

¹⁷ This improvement was tracked by the difference between research skills for students before and after introduction of *R* as a basic statistical platform on our departmental assessments of capstone papers. Students who went on to graduate school found that their analytic skills were better developed than those of their classmates.

¹⁸ Best and Mallinson (2024) mention device incompatibility as a major source of problems. This proved true in this course.

¹⁹ Using *WebCHIP* in other courses proved, as Arikan and Milosav (2024) found, a successful way to both introduce research methods to those who had not had prior exposure and to reinforce learning for those who had.

²⁰ These exercises were designed after examples in Carter (2010).

research questions.

Discussion

There are many different approaches to introductory research methods courses. Addressing the three challenges directly—the data revolution, the explosion of new analytical environments, and the credibility revolution—is seldom a major focus.²¹ This is a product of the *goals* of such courses. Most instructors do have particular goals for their methods courses; in most cases, these group around positivist models of scientific understanding. In the syllabi examined above, all had course outcomes that emphasized understanding political science research using a hypothetical-deductive framework and acquiring frequentist research skills.²² There is, however, considerable diversity in the subjects taught in methods courses and in course requirements. This reflects the diversity of faculty teaching them; learning how to teach methods courses is often a trial-and-error process, and the methodological strengths of instructors vary. The result is a lack of “pedagogic culture” that further inhibits the ability of political science programs to develop coherent strategies to adopt methods across courses (Earley 2014, Lewthwaite and Nind 2016). This is not to say that the concept of connecting research methods to program goals is absent. Ishiyama (2005b, 2019) found that curriculum structure is the most effective predictor of required undergraduate research methods courses in political science and that the more structured the program, the better the results for the students. But a planned curriculum is no guarantee of general pedagogical structure in particular courses, particularly when those courses, like research methods, involve conveying difficult techniques mastered by a limited number of faculty. Does an emphasis on the three challenges help to remedy this situation, and if it does, is such a change feasible?

The answer is that it might if it were tied to a change in course goals. Here present trends in both data analysis and research work with the three challenges. The lack of a generally accepted research methods core is both a curse and a blessing. Instructors in research methods typically find students (and often themselves) with differing goals and incoming skill sets. The “stat anxiety” this imparts is often crippling to course goals and to efforts to integrate research methods into the program curriculum (Lewis-Beck 2001).²³ But if the flexibility implied by the challenges is embraced, this can be liberating.

Here, the order in which I have considered the challenges should be reversed. The concern about credible findings is tied to a concern about how models fit data. Illustrating how models fit data is the central purpose of research methods courses (Fife 2020). What addressing credibility brings to the table in such courses is, in general, the reason they can be interesting: the techniques taught in them can be used to assess the usefulness of different sorts of claims made by models. This means the usefulness of models of political behavior for explaining what is happening in the real world becomes the center of the course (Clarke and Primo 2012).²⁴ That further implies that aspects of different models used to create descriptions of politics must be tested as they are built. Here, the diverse styles of instructors in political science become a real strength. Different models of politics require different kinds of approaches and different kinds of data. But the centering of causality and the pursuit of reliable findings has a general consensus in all programs and in all research methods courses in the discipline. Further, as the qualitative study above suggests, the groundwork is already done.

Adopting new data environments can have useful effects. Although again, there is little reason to abandon statistical applications already installed and supported by institutions, open-source applications have much to recommend them. Using open-source data analysis applications frees both students and instructors, although implementation may impose barriers to both (Li, 2019). For students, such applications can spell a release from the “stat anxiety” previously mentioned and help them manage the time restrictions on research (Arikan and Milosav 2024). This is a useful lesson in all courses. For instructors, these applications can open new approaches at the bleeding edge of research and impart this knowledge to the students.²⁵ In addition, having an independent application used by the students themselves can open new avenues for work both in subsequent classes in political science and as they pursue careers after graduation.²⁶

Finally, as Gill (2021) says, political science is a *data science*. Facing the influx of data of all sorts is an opportunity to widen the appeal of the course itself. Embracing the data revolution will require approaching all its forms. That will necessitate broadening both the kinds of data treated, and the data management skills taught. For many years, political scientists have lamented the lack of a wider approach, including qualitative methods in research courses (Schwartz and Yanow 2002). A commitment to the data revolution will probably bring the use of unstructured data like text and video, and techniques for

²¹ Again, see Llaudet and Imai 2023. See also Remler and Van Ryzin 2015. I have given Llaudet and Imai pride of place due to length; Remler and Van Ryzin is more suitable for a two semester or graduate course.

²² 35% mentioned citizenship skills or employment opportunities and that usually in passing.

²³ The other short papers in the symposium on “Teaching Undergraduate Methods” in volume 10(1) of *The Political Methodologist* are also relevant. It should not surprise that the concerns voiced 24 years ago are still alive today.

²⁴ This does not, however, require that instructors accept every aspect of the “semantic view” of political science Clarke and Primo support.

²⁵ My students became much more open to subsequent research efforts after becoming acclimated to R Commander. Further, many of them tried and in some cases adopted other open source programs for projects as needed. For an overview of available options see, again, Niu et al (2021).

²⁶ One of my students got a job with a construction company after graduation. He later told me he got the job because he was the only candidate who could define a standard deviation and had worked with a data analysis application. I have heard many stories like this.

wrangling and analyzing them into methods courses (Grossman and Pedahzur 2020). Given the diverse interests of students, this could increase the appeal of the course, especially across disciplines. Further, students who undertake data collection efforts for community service-learning projects will both learn data collection and management and acquire skills to make policy-relevant findings (Robinson 2000). Both kinds of knowledge are basic to what most political science programs are trying to achieve.

Incorporating the challenges can, in other words, provide a framework for programs to build around without limiting instructors' styles in research methods courses. The analysis of syllabi above, despite its many limitations, indicates that treatment of many subjects within the challenges is already being addressed. Further, as the practical examples I provided should indicate, there are multiple avenues for interested programs to pursue addressing the diversity of instructor viewpoints and the differing character and motivations of students the programs must accommodate. The challenges can provide an open framework that addresses the situations in research methods courses without sacrificing rigor or student interest. The possible payoffs are worth the additional planning (Ishiyama 2005b).

Conclusions

There is considerable research on many questions concerning research methods courses.²⁷ Most present work on the courses themselves, however, has concentrated on the adoption of methods courses by political science programs. There has been little research on what such courses teach or what their themes of instruction are. The survey by Turner and Thies (2009) and the recent work by Lam and Hung (2024), although useful, do not address the demands of present research environments, as embodied in the three challenges. I took the path I did in this paper because I thought that laying the groundwork with a qualitative analysis of research methods syllabi and then suggesting methods for reaching the challenges in ongoing classes would prove useful. I have always found that advice drawn from descriptions of courses addressing problems of pedagogy is better than an abstract model. I turned to this combination of descriptions again here. The challenges will emerge for any political science research methods course and for its students. In this article, I have tried to show pathways to addressing them.

At present, the challenges are not considered directly by many instructors when they put their syllabi together. Work in the academy and with public and private employers, however, increasingly demands familiarity with the challenges, and while basic courses cannot pass on skills of this complexity completely, they are an excellent place to start. I believe all the challenges need to be addressed as integral parts of basic political science research methods courses and, by extension, program curricula. What has been left out here is greater than what has been included, particularly the major issue of how to address the three challenges in courses focused on qualitative methods. However, this is an introductory study intended primarily to support pedagogy in basic methods courses; there is a need for more systematic research on how to address these challenges.

This will probably turn out to be problematic. As the syllabi of basic methods courses show, instructors address subjects connected with at least one of the challenges (usually, indirectly, the credibility revolution) at some point, though how they do it will probably vary considerably. Pedagogy is an art as well as a science, and different styles of approach will probably lead to different emphasis on (again, usually one) of the three challenges. I believe this needs to change. The main problem is increasing student awareness of all the challenges at an earlier stage of their career. I expect that programs may make a cost-benefit decision to leave considering the challenges to later training. Later training for undergraduates, however, often does not include a consistent view of the challenges and how to face them. The result could be political science graduates unable to defend the discipline against attacks based on the challenges against both the social sciences in general and political science in particular. Being unable to face public or professional questions arising from the three challenges can do nothing to enhance the place in society of political science or the knowledge and research skills it imparts. Without research on this problem, it may never be faced. But, if it is, the possible rewards to political science programs in terms of better coherence in their goals and greater capabilities of their students could be substantial.

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²⁷See the aforementioned symposium in volume 10 (1) of *The Political Methodologist* or Best and Mallinson (2023) and other articles in the symposium in the *Journal of Political Science Education* volume 20 (4). There are many other examples.

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Municipal Golf Courses and Social Change

John R. Bennett¹, J. Scott McDonald², Keith A. Merwin³, Gerald A. Merwin Jr.⁴

¹Savannah State University, Department of Political Science & Public Affairs, bennettj@savannahstate.edu

²University of Texas El Paso

³Merwin Associates

⁴Valdosta State University

ABSTRACT

Municipal golf courses (munis) hold a significant yet often underappreciated position within the golfing community and broader society. This article addresses this lack of appreciation by examining the multiple roles munis have played in light of their historical, social, and leadership significance and concludes with an assessment of the roles munis may play in the future. From political science and public administration perspectives, this paper is largely exploratory; there is a paucity of quantitative data available in the literature to assess the impacts of munis. The U.S. Census Bureau maintains almost no data on golf courses, whether publicly or privately owned. Additionally, scholars have published few empirically based studies. The primary storehouse of quantitative data on golf and golf courses is proprietary under the auspices of the National Golf Foundation (NGF). The authors sought and were denied access to these data without considerable cash expenditure. Despite their value, munis increasingly are under threat, grappling with financial deficits and pressures to repurpose land for alternative uses. These challenges extend beyond the sport itself, impacting urban green spaces, biodiversity, flood mitigation, and off-season recreational activities. This paper argues for a comprehensive re-evaluation of the multifaceted roles that munis play in urban environments.

Definitions

As golf course definitions can be somewhat confusing, a few are warranted at this juncture for clarity. A public course is one that is open to the community; the word public refers to usage rather than ownership. A private course is a members-only course, and many of these courses allow public access when not busy with members' play. Munis are owned by a village, town, city, county or other unit of government and are open to the public for play. Municipal courses are sometimes referred to as public courses. Municipal courses allow play by individuals residing both within and outside the jurisdiction, although preferential treatment may be offered to individuals residing within the jurisdiction. For the purposes of this paper, we opt for a narrow definition of a muni as a course owned by a village, town, or city.

History of Munis and Desegregation

The first municipal course opened in 1895 at Van Cortlandt Park in New York City. The development of munis was the most critical factor in the democratization of American golf (Kirsch 2005). At its inception democratization was defined as white males, and the democratization of white females followed soon after. Much later, other groups, notably African Americans, gained the franchise to play on munis in specific locales. A year later in 1896 Boston opened a muni, and Chicago followed in 1899 (Kirsch 2005).

Munis soon spread to the suburbs, further democratizing the sport. In the late 1890s and early 1900s, munis expanded their franchise from rich men only to middle class and lower class men; however, they were predominately white.

White women and white lower-income classes played munis much earlier than persons of color, notably African Americans. The National Museum of African American History and Culture, a part of the Smithsonian, reports, "Even today African American access to professional and elite country clubs remains limited, and the number of successful African American golfers continues to be small" (n.d.). Munis, therefore, play a critical role in the African American and Hispanic golfing communities. Throughout the old South, Jim Crow customs controlled who could play on a muni. Persons of color either had no course or were relegated to specific courses of inferior quality until 1951 when Lions Municipal Golf Course in Austin, Texas became the first course south of the Mason Dixon Line to racially integrate (Rossow 2023).

While conditions were better for Black golfers in much of the North and West, battles were fought to gain access to "white only" munis. In 1941, Black golfers in the nation's capital turned to Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, who, "in keeping with his landmark decision to let Marian Anderson perform at the Lincoln Memorial, ordered the desegregation of courses operated by the National Park Service" (DC Historic Preservation Office n.d.). However, it wasn't until 1955 that all the district's public courses removed informal barriers to Black golfers. Earlier in 1948, Black golfers sued the City of Baltimore

for access to that city's munis and won their case. The victory was not total as the Baltimore Board of Recreation decided to establish separate tee times for African American and white golfers, but it was a beginning. It wasn't until 1956 that all restrictions were lifted.

While desegregation of munis crept along with fits and starts in various northern cities, "the Professional Golfers Association (PGA) limited its membership to white players. Since its founding in 1916, the organization held this as an unspoken rule, adding their whites-only policy in writing in 1943. The exclusion of Black golfers from the PGA continued until 1961."

Rather than integrate, some cities sought other remedies. The sale of public courses to private corporations to continue segregation was an established practice. In 1952, Knoxville, Tennessee leased its course rather than integrate (The Original Golf Blogger 2024).

Lions Municipal Golf Course is the oldest course in Austin, Texas, having been established in 1924 by the local Lions Club. Its affordable fees made it the choice of budget-minded golfers including "police officers, bartenders, and school teachers" (Trostel 2019). In 1950, Lions became the first course in the South to integrate after a 9-year-old caddie and a friend defied Jim Crow laws by playing the course. "They were detained, but Austin Mayor Taylor Glass let them go instead of jailing them for trespassing. Subsequently, the city council decided to let all golfers, Black and white, play at Lions rather than build a separate course for African Americans" (Trostel 2019). That decision made the course a destination for Black golfers from far beyond Austin. "In fact, so many people wanted to play at Lions in the 1950s and 1960s that buses were used to shuttle players from other parts of the state. Public figures such as boxing legend Joe Louis, an outspoken advocate for Black golfers, held clinics at Lions that often attracted thousands of spectators" (Trostel 2019).

Savannah is one of Georgia's top golf destinations attracting a diverse collection of players, but it also has a troubling history of indignities suffered by Black players on local courses. Yet, African American golfers persisted in Savannah and "played in tournaments with pioneers like Lee Elder, the first Black golfer to compete at the Masters, and Calvin Peete, a 12-time winner on the PGA Tour who was the most successful Black professional golfer before a guy named Tiger arrived on tour" and in doing so "challenged societal taboos and unwritten rules that were intended to clearly communicate that a Black man didn't belong on the golf course" (Weeks 2014).

Weeks describes how Jimmy Lee Ford and Jimmy Wesley, two of Savannah's Black golf pioneers, changed the local game: "Ford, a caddie at the Savannah Golf Club in his teens who was often run off the course when he tried to sneak on to play, became the first Black member at both Bacon Park and Mary Calder golf courses. And in the early 1960s, Wesley spearheaded a successful petition for Black players to be allowed to play in the Mary Calder Invitational, which was one of Savannah's premier tournaments at the time" (2014).

African American Golf Participation Today

The NGF reports that 45 million Americans participated in golf in 2023, representing 40% of the population. Their report, "Golf Participation Update – Bigger, Younger, and Cooler," describes participation in golf since 2018: Over this time, some of the biggest rises in on-course players have come in categories traditionally under-represented: females and people of color. The number of women and girls playing golf on a course has risen 23% since 2018, while the number of Asian, Black, and Hispanic golfers has jumped 43%, outpacing the changes in a U.S. population that's becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Meanwhile, there's been a 40% increase in the number of juniors getting out on the golf course.

Still, barriers remain that prevent African Americans from participating at rates similar to their White counterparts, and they extend to young or "junior" players and more experienced golfers alike. Black golfers may be discouraged by golf courses that are located in wealthy areas, including gated communities, that require pricey membership fees. The cost of equipment can also make golf too expensive for some (African American Golfer's Digest 2023). Despite the notoriety of Tiger Woods, professional golf remains a largely white sport. Of the 29,000 members of the PGA, less than 1% are African American. In response to the lack of Black golf professionals, the PGA formed PGA Works, an initiative designed to "diversify the golf industry's workforce. Funded by REACH, the PGA's 501(c)(3) charitable foundation, PGA WORKS leverages fellowships, scholarships, career exploration events, and the PGA WORKS Collegiate Championship to inspire and engage talent from diverse backgrounds to pursue key employment positions across the golf industry."

Nonetheless, interest in golf among young African Americans remains low, especially compared to other sports such as football and basketball, "due to cultural preferences, lack of value placed on golf, relatively high costs associated with the game, and access discrimination" (Dillon 2019). When added together, these variables give clarity to the lack of minority participation in golf. Dillon suggests that this in turn exacerbates the problem of few African Americans among the ranks of golf professionals.

Yet it's not just in the ranks of golf professionals that African Americans are underrepresented. Thinking about golf not as just a sport but a societal construct means that Black Americans have not had the same access to golf as a tool for deal-making, networking, and other connections which take place on golf courses. Golf has long been recognized as a valuable tool in the business world (Golf Oklahoma 2024).

Golf provides a unique environment for networking, as the relaxed atmosphere allows business professionals to build relationships and foster connections outside of traditional office settings. Social interactions on the golf course can lead to stronger business ties. Playing a round of golf can facilitate trust-building among business partners. The informal setting encourages open communication and rapport, which are essential for successful business relationships. Shared experiences like golf can also enhance trust and collaboration.

The sport requires strategic planning and problem-solving skills, which can translate to business contexts. The skills developed on the course (such as patience, focus, and analytical thinking) can be beneficial in a corporate environment. Inviting clients to play golf can strengthen business relationships, providing a platform for informal discussions while enjoying a recreational activity. Golf is often used by executives as a tool for client engagement and retention. Many companies incorporate golf into their corporate culture, promoting it as a team-building activity. Golf outings can enhance employee morale and promote a sense of camaraderie among staff, leading to increased productivity. "Fifty years ago, when large companies hired young men into their management training programs (and at that time it almost without exception was men), many expected that new hires would build relationships with clients on a golf course. And golf did something else – it created the chance for those young men to interact informally with senior managers" (Richards 2023).

Moreover, golf is important in a larger societal context, with significant cultural importance to African Americans. Golf has a complex history in the United States, often reflecting broader racial dynamics. The exclusion of African Americans from many clubs and tournaments until the mid-20th century meant that the sport became a symbol of exclusion that Black Americans are still working to overcome (Barlow 2010). The visibility of Tiger Woods and other professional golfers has served as inspiration for many African Americans, encouraged participation, and demonstrated that success in golf is attainable, thereby challenging stereotypes (McCarthy 2019). There is some research to suggest that golf is increasingly embraced as a means of cultural expression and identity within the African American community. This shift reflects broader changes in society's view of the sport, allowing for a richer dialogue about race, privilege, and access. This points to the critical role munis play as social hubs where individuals from diverse backgrounds can come together. This interaction fosters community ties and can lead to increased civic participation and socializing, which can enhance community cohesion (National Golf Foundation 2021).

Recognizing that participation by Black golfers and younger people in general is low, the First Tee program was developed in 1997 with the support of the leading golf organizations such as The Augusta National, Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) Tour, PGA, PGA Tour and United States Golf Association (USGA). Today there "are 150 chapters with programs delivered at 1,400 golf courses, 10,000 schools and 1,700 youth centers in all 50 states and select international locations" (First Tee 2024). The First Tee program plays a significant role in helping African American young people access golf, primarily through its focus on inclusivity, mentorship, and community engagement, aiming to introduce the game of golf to children and teens, particularly those from underserved communities, thereby promoting life skills, character development, and healthy habits (Skelton 2022).

One of the key aspects of First Tee's approach is its emphasis on creating a welcoming environment for African American youth. The program aims to dismantle barriers that have historically limited access to golf for these communities, such as economic constraints and social stigmas associated with the sport. By offering affordable or free programs, First Tee reduces the likelihood that financial limitation will prevent participation and helps overcome the lack of accessibility to golf courses in African American-populated areas, highlighting the need for community-based programs to increase participation (Dillon 2019).

First Tee also incorporates mentorship and role models into its programming, which is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and aspiration among African American youth. The presence of African American golf professionals and coaches within the program serves to inspire young participants and provide relatable figures who can guide beginners through both the technical aspects of golf and the broader life skills that the sport promotes (Skelton 2022). This mentorship is essential, as studies indicate that positive role models can significantly impact the self-esteem and aspirations of youth from marginalized backgrounds (Brittian and Williams 2016).

The program's curriculum integrates lessons on respect, perseverance, and integrity, all of which are vital for success in golf and personal development. This holistic approach to youth development is supported by research indicating that programs focusing on positive youth development can effectively enhance self-identity and resilience among African American youth (Travis and Leech 2013). By fostering a supportive community and emphasizing personal growth, First Tee helps participants build confidence and develop a positive ethnic-racial identity, which is crucial for their overall well-being (Brittian and Williams 2016).

The Years of Decline

The post-World War II golf boom continued through the 1980s, with cities and towns expanding their public golf offerings to meet demand. The number of rounds played remained relatively high through the 1990s, with estimates around 450 million

rounds annually. This period marked a strong interest in golf, fueled by the rise of stars like Tiger Woods toward the decade's end. In mid 2000s, rounds played peaked at about 510 million annually (2005-2006) with this growth driven by economic prosperity and an increase in golf course construction.

By the 2010s, munis began to face headwinds in the form of declining participation, degradation, and competition from private courses and new entertainment options. According to the National Golf Foundation, the number of golf courses peaked at 16,000, with significant closures reported over the following years (National Golf Foundation 2020). A report highlighted that as of 2019, there were approximately 14,000 golf courses, marking a significant decrease from the previous highs (Golf Course Industry Magazine 2019). Approximately 1,700 golf courses closed between 2006 and 2016, reflecting the economic and cultural shifts in the sport. More than 200 courses closed in 2016 alone, with another 175 closing in 2017 (Deegan 2017). The number of rounds played per year began to decline, falling to around 450 million by the end of the decade due to economic downturns, changing demographics, and competition from other recreational activities. By February 2019, there were 2,497 munis in the United States, comprising about 17% of all courses (United States Golf Association 2019).

Challenges munis faced include financial difficulties exacerbated by declining interest in golf among younger generations. When municipalities have budget constraints, they may find it challenging to maintain and operate golf courses. Coupled with the growing popularity of alternative recreational activities such as hiking, biking, and fitness classes, some cities converted golf courses into other types of recreational facilities or sold the land for development. In fact, beginning around 2015 and continuing today, a spate of articles pondered the question, "Is cycling the new golf?" Among the advantages of cycling as a networking activity are the lower cost of entry and required skill level. "Cycling attracts senior business people and professionals looking for an outlet for their drive" (Richardson 2023).

In Louisville, Kentucky city officials struggled over whether to continue operating their golf courses, sell or lease them to private operators, or close and redevelop them for new uses. Leasing courses "would shift the burden of operation risk to the lessee, administrative overhead would be eliminated, Louisville would be relieved of the day-to-day responsibility of maintaining and operating the courses, and the lessee could repair the courses, some of which need more than \$1 million of maintenance" (Thomas 2019). Yet, the very question of municipal course profitability prompted more existential questions from the golfers, with some asking via public input opportunities, "Tennis courts don't make money. Libraries don't make money. Swimming pools don't make money. So why do we expect all of the golf courses to be profitable?" (Thomas 2019) Others took the opposite position: "Muni golf will always have a place, but there will always be challenges. Municipalities have to collect garbage and pay police. If they can't make the case for golf, they have to strongly consider to live without it. At some places, it is the survival of the fittest. At some places golf is just a luxury they can't afford" (Deegan 2018).

The environmental management of golf courses, particularly in regard to water usage and irrigation practices, has also been a drag on new course construction and existing course maintenance. "America's roughly 16,000 golf courses use 1.5 billion gallons of water a day, according to the United States Golf Association, and are collectively treated with 100,000 tons of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium a year" (Buckley 2024). Studies indicate that golf courses, including munis, are increasingly expected to implement water conservation practices due to pressures on water resources. Reflecting a shift in how these courses are managed to ensure sustainability, this trend is particularly evident in arid regions where treated wastewater is used for irrigation.

Course Redevelopment

Munis increasingly became targets for redevelopment, as cities and towns looked for ways to trim budgets and address other needs such as residents' demands for housing and green space. Some communities converted struggling golf courses into public parks and green spaces that include walking trails, sports fields, natural habitats, and supports for biodiversity. A former golf course in suburban Cleveland was converted into a 237-acre park with "a 3.6-mile walking trail and restored streams, meadows, and wetlands," transforming it into a "picturesque" and "popular wedding destination" and in Belgium, Wisconsin, "a 116-acre course was purchased by the Ozaukee Washington Land Trust and transformed into the Forest Beach Migratory Preserve. Its clubhouse became a community center. Trails through the habitat areas, which include five constructed wetland ponds, range from 0.25 miles to 1.5 miles" (Green 2009).

In Milton, Georgia, the city drastically increased its acreage of public green space in 2017 when it purchased the Milton Country Club for \$5 million. "We're forever preserving 137 acres in the heart of Milton," said Mayor Joe Lockwood. "Not to mention this green space purchase includes several miles of built-in trails that can potentially connect to the Milton trail system and 1.6 miles of beautiful creek frontage. When we considered the amount of acreage we could preserve at this cost, it was an opportunity that we simply could not pass up for our residents and future generations" (Dixon 2017).

In some areas, golf courses are being redeveloped into residential communities in an attempt to address housing shortages (Dunham-Jones and Williamson 2009). Though not a widespread phenomenon, some courses have converted into urban farms or community gardens, promoting local food production and sustainable practices while making use of existing irrigation systems. Similarly, golf courses can serve as wildlife habitats as they are converted to or returned to being wetlands.

COVID-19: A Boost for Municipal Golf Courses

In Georgia, one popular recreation and vacation destination struggled to react to the COVID 19 pandemic. The Jekyll Island Authority (JIA), the self-supporting authority responsible for the management of Jekyll Island state park in Glynn County, shifted to remote working for its employees and closed major attractions including the Georgia Sea Turtle Center and the Mosaic museum, which chronicled the island's cultural and environmental history. JIA's three 18-hole golf courses, on the other hand, never ceased operation. The clubhouse was closed, cart rentals were suspended, and ball washing stations were removed in attempt to comply with COVID guidance, but golfing continued.

In a world where social distancing was required, golf emerged as an activity well suited for social distancing and fresh air. The impact of COVID on Jekyll Island golf is now apparent, as the authority's golf revenue increased from \$1.8 million to \$2.5 million from fiscal year 2020 to fiscal year 2021. Since then, "revenue continued to rise substantially to \$3.1 million in FY 2022. It grew but at a slower rate in FY 2023, rising to \$3.37 million" (Cooper 2024). The JIA is now embarking on a multi-year golf improvement project to further leverage the popularity of island courses.

Jekyll Island golfers were not alone as millions of people identified golf as a safe outdoor activity during the pandemic. According to the NGF, rounds played in the U.S. increased by nearly 20% in 2020 compared to the previous year. This surge was attributed to golfers seeking social distancing and fresh air (2021). Golf courses implemented various health and safety protocols, including reduced capacity, social distancing measures, and enhanced sanitation. Many courses eliminated or modified traditional practices, such as removing rakes from bunkers and adjusting flagstick handling to minimize contact (Golf Course Superintendents Association of America 2020).

The demand for golf equipment also surged during the pandemic. The NGF reported a significant increase in sales of golf clubs, balls, and apparel, as many new players entered the sport or returned after years away (National Golf Foundation 2021). Golf courses and organizations enhanced their digital presence, utilizing online booking systems and social media to engage with customers. Innovations in technology, including apps for tee time reservations and virtual coaching, became more popular (Golf Business Monitor 2020).

The pandemic saw a diversification in the demographics of golfers. Many courses reported an increase in younger players and women participating in the sport, driven by the welcoming nature of golf as a socially distanced activity (Carroll 2024). While many sectors struggled, the golf industry showed resilience. The Golf Industry Association noted that while some facilities faced challenges, many reported profitability due to increased play and reduced operational costs during lock-downs (Golf Industry Association 2020). However, not all operational challenges appeared during the pandemic, including difficulty in finding and retaining employees, increased labor costs, and higher prices for "topdressing sand, fertilizer and maintenance equipment," and scarcity and supply chain issues related to other materials (Jacobs 2022).

Munis and other courses within driving distance were the greatest beneficiaries of the pandemic golf boom, while destination golf courses such as the facilities located in Hawaii suffered severely as the number of local golfers were not sufficient to keep courses populated at pre-pandemic levels. The shift to working from home was also a factor, as people reallocated to golf the time previously spent in long commutes to the office. The pandemic golf boom reversed the fortunes of the sport. In 2019, golf participation rose for the first time since 2006, with 441 million rounds played on U.S. golf courses, up from 434 million in 2018. In 2019 75% of golf facilities were open to the public, including more than 2,500 munis and 8,300 daily-fee courses (National Golf Foundation 2020).

Golf Since the Pandemic

A significant number of municipal courses were financially struggling before the pandemic. They were competing against Top Golf franchises, which offer beer, food, and social setting for millennials. Some golf industry analysts theorized that young people would be more likely to play traditional courses if marijuana is allowed during play. Others talked about the "hole in the middle" of golf, with retirees and older players at one end of the spectrum and young golfers at the other. In some areas, golf operators complained of over saturation, with too many courses and not enough players.

As the pandemic has had lasting effects on all areas of public life, its impact on golf has continued and, interestingly, may have turned around munis in the aggregate. "Municipal golf is not facing an existential threat. In fact, the 2,939 municipal courses currently operating in the U.S. is an all-time high and represents just over 18% of the country's overall golf course supply" (National Golf Foundation 2024). Along with new municipal course construction, existing courses are being renovated, improved, and expanded. "Munaisance," as it is characterized, continues the appeal of munis as alternatives to more exclusive golf properties:

Municipal golf, however, is for everyone. When you drive up to a publicly-owned golf course, there's no one casting an eye in your direction to determine whether you're a member, guest or unauthorized interloper. You don't need a tee time to enjoy the amenities. Remember, putting is free at municipal courses. (Gavrich 2024)

The Future of Municipal Golf and Social Transformation

Munis in the post-pandemic United States are largely regarded as beneficial to the cities and towns that own and operate them. They contribute to local economies by attracting visitors, creating jobs, and generating revenue through events and tournaments. A trend toward the adoption of eco-friendly maintenance practices may also help to address criticism of courses as over-consumers of water, herbicides and other chemicals, and public space in general. Successful responses by munis to the pandemic may also make them models of resiliency, providing examples of how public amenities can adapt to difficult and even deadly situations.

For African Americans and other groups that have historically been excluded from golf and may still face difficulty participating today, munis are even more important. They typically offer lower fees, making golf more accessible. They often serve as community hubs where African Americans can connect, network, and engage in social activities. They provide a welcoming environment for individuals to gather and build relationships. First Tee and similar initiatives aim to introduce golf to young African Americans, provide mentorship, coaching, and opportunities to compete, and to cultivate interest and skill in the sport from a young age.

Representation also matters. Munis can play a role in increasing representation in the sport, helping to create spaces where African Americans feel welcome and included. By participating in municipal golf, African Americans can challenge stereotypes and help to diversify the sport, encouraging broader representation in golf at all levels. While Black Americans are not well-represented in the golf industry, munis provide a point of entry by providing job opportunities in various roles from course maintenance to management. And munis may play a role in addressing health disparities. Golf promotes physical activity and mental well-being. For African Americans, having access to recreational activities like golf can contribute positively to community health.

As munis have rebounded from years of decline since the pandemic, a nationwide housing shortage, demand for public green space, and other pressures will continue to create challenges. Elected officials, municipal staffs, community leaders, and golfers themselves will be required to justify the continued existence of municipal courses as historic and future locals of social change.

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Evaluating the Fiscal Impacts of City-County Consolidation: Revenue Diversification and Stability in Macon-Bibb County, Georgia

Min Su Kim¹

¹Department of Government & Sociology, Georgia College & State University, min.kim@gcsu.edu

ABSTRACT

City-county consolidation is often promoted as a reform strategy to enhance administrative efficiency and diversify local revenue sources. This study evaluates the 2014 consolidation of Macon and Bibb County, Georgia, focusing on its impact on revenue base diversification and fiscal stability. Using a comparative interrupted time series (CITS) design and panel data from 2006 to 2023, the analysis compares Macon-Bibb to Columbus-Muscogee County—Georgia’s long-established consolidated government—to isolate the effects of consolidation from broader fiscal trends. Findings reveal a significant short-term decline in revenue concentration, measured by the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI), reflecting increased reliance on sales, franchise, and insurance premium taxes. However, there is no statistically significant shift in the long-term diversification trend. These results underscore the potential of consolidation to trigger immediate fiscal improvements, while highlighting the need for sustained administrative and policy commitment to achieve enduring structural reform.

Introduction

City-county consolidation has long been proposed as a structural reform strategy to improve local governance by reducing administrative fragmentation, expanding fiscal capacity, and enhancing service efficiency. While enthusiasm for such reform has waned nationally, it remains a timely and relevant policy option in Georgia, which leads the nation in the number of consolidated governments. As fiscal pressures mount and local governments confront growing service demands with limited resources, more counties may revisit consolidation as a potential solution.

Despite its conceptual appeal, the empirical evidence on the fiscal impacts of consolidation is mixed. Some studies highlight improvements in financial performance, liquidity, or tax base diversity following mergers (McCabe and Pavlakovich-Kochi 2014; Meares and Hatcher 2018). Others caution that consolidation’s benefits are often uneven, context-dependent, or limited to short-term gains (Savitch, Vogel, and Ye 2010; Swanson 2000). One dimension of fiscal performance that remains underexplored is the long-term impact of consolidation on revenue diversification—a key indicator of local financial resilience and stability.

This study addresses this gap by examining the 2014 consolidation of Macon and Bibb County, Georgia, through the lens of revenue-based diversification. Using a comparative interrupted time series (CITS) design and longitudinal panel data from 2006 to 2023, the study assesses whether the consolidation resulted in a more balanced and sustainable fiscal structure. To strengthen causal inference, Columbus-Muscogee County—Georgia’s longest-standing consolidated government—is used as a control. While previous research has often relied on pre- and post-comparisons within a single jurisdiction, this design allows us to isolate consolidation effects from broader state or regional fiscal trends.

This paper contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it offers one of the few empirical evaluations of city-county consolidation that focuses on fiscal diversification using a quasi-experimental design. Second, it clarifies the short-term versus long-term impacts of consolidation, distinguishing between immediate structural shocks and persistent trend changes—an issue that has often been mischaracterized in prior studies. Third, it provides timely insight for policymakers in Georgia and other states who are weighing the trade-offs of consolidation as a response to fiscal strain.

The Macon-Bibb case provides a unique opportunity to evaluate the real-world consequences of consolidation nearly a decade after implementation. The findings help clarify whether structural reform alone is sufficient to produce lasting fiscal transformation or whether sustained administrative commitment and adaptive revenue strategies are necessary to build on early gains.

Theoretical Foundations of City-County Consolidation

The scholarship on city-county consolidation spans public administration, governance, and public finance, focusing on the political processes and administrative outcomes of merging jurisdictions. Consolidation is often examined through the lens of

improving efficiency, enhancing service delivery, and ensuring fiscal stability. This literature review synthesizes theoretical and empirical insights to provide a robust foundation for analyzing the impact of consolidation on revenue structures, with a particular focus on Macon-Bibb County.

Defining City-County Consolidation

City-county consolidation refers to the merging of city and county governments into a single administrative entity designed to streamline operations and unify governance structures. Proponents argue that consolidations can reduce redundancies, promote economies of scale, and simplify governance, leading to improved public service delivery (Carr and Feiock 1999; Baum and O'Malley 2018). Theoretical underpinnings often reference public choice theory, which emphasizes reducing fragmentation in local governance to enhance efficiency and accountability (Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren 1961).

While many advocates highlight potential cost savings and administrative streamlining, the success of consolidation initiatives often hinges on the specific design of governance charters, administrative alignment, and public support (Dollery and Worthington 1996; Leland and Thurmaier 2005). Governance structures must address potential challenges, including aligning fiscal practices, balancing representation, and fostering transparency (Campbell and Selden 2000). The history of failed consolidations highlights the importance of these factors in ensuring that reforms yield their intended benefits.

Conditions for Successful Consolidation

A recurring theme in the literature is that successful consolidations arise under particular conditions. Rosenbaum and Kammerer (1974) argue that fiscal crises often catalyze consolidation efforts by creating a sense of urgency and encouraging public and elite support for reform. Their work emphasizes that consolidations are more likely to succeed when prompted by clear financial or service delivery challenges.

Building on this, Leland and Thurmaier (2004) developed the “3 Cs” model—crisis climate, elite consensus, and political campaign. They contend that these three factors must align to overcome political resistance and implement reform effectively. Public trust and political leadership play critical roles in addressing stakeholder concerns and ensuring successful implementation. This model underscores the delicate balance between urgency and stakeholder engagement required for effective governance reform.

Revenue Diversification in Local Governments

Revenue diversification is a critical strategy for local governments seeking fiscal stability and resilience. By broadening revenue sources, municipalities can reduce reliance on volatile income streams, such as property or sales taxes, and adapt to economic fluctuations (Bahl 2008; Mikesell 2013). Diverse revenue streams also allow governments to allocate resources more effectively and mitigate fiscal shocks (Chernick and Reschovsky 2003).

In the context of city-county consolidation, revenue diversification often involves restructuring fiscal systems to accommodate expanded service delivery. Empirical studies suggest that diversified revenue strategies contribute to long-term fiscal sustainability and provide a buffer against economic downturns (Ebdon and Franklin 2006; Swianiewicz and Lukomska 2019). This approach can be particularly advantageous in regions where economic conditions are subject to periodic fluctuations, such as those reliant on specific industries or resource-based economies.

Empirical Evidence on Fiscal Impacts

Numerous studies provide robust empirical evidence highlighting the fiscal advantages of city-county consolidation. McCabe and Pavlakovich-Kochi (2014) observed that consolidated governments frequently shift toward broader tax bases, such as sales taxes, to accommodate the needs of larger and more diverse populations. Likewise, Meares and Hatcher (2018) emphasized the favorable fiscal outcomes of Augusta-Richmond County's consolidation, citing improvements in liquidity and operational efficiency. These findings align with theoretical expectations, suggesting that consolidation enhances the financial stability of local governments by diversifying revenue streams and optimizing cost management.

Revenue diversification has been consistently identified as a pivotal element in achieving fiscal stability. Research by Chernick and Reschovsky (2003) and Swianiewicz and Lukomska (2019) indicates that consolidated governments with a diverse array of revenue sources are better positioned to weather economic fluctuations. For example, in Macon-Bibb County, franchise and insurance premium taxes experienced substantial growth following consolidation, reflecting significant progress toward establishing a more balanced revenue framework (Carr and Feiock 1999).

The fiscal impacts of city-county consolidation, however, are intricate and highly dependent on context. Advocates frequently highlight cost savings, revenue stability, and enhanced fiscal efficiency as key advantages. McCabe and Pavlakovich-Kochi (2014) found that consolidated governments tend to expand their tax bases, such as by increasing reliance on sales taxes, to meet the demands of more extensive and varied jurisdictions. Similarly, Meares and Hatcher (2018) documented the fiscal benefits of Augusta-Richmond County's consolidation, particularly improvements in liquidity and operational effectiveness, which were most pronounced when one jurisdiction in the merger faced financial distress.

Longitudinal studies further underscore that consolidated governments often adopt more balanced revenue strategies over time, mitigating fiscal vulnerability (Ebdon and Franklin 2006). Nonetheless, other scholars caution against assuming uniform efficiency gains. For instance, Swanson (2000) and Savitch, Vogel, and Ye (2010) observed that potential savings may be negated by increased administrative costs, political compromises, and complexities associated with staffing agreements.

Challenges and Critiques

Despite its potential benefits, city-county consolidation presents significant challenges. Critics argue that mergers may dilute local political representation and exacerbate service delivery inequities, particularly in socioeconomically diverse regions (Hendrick 2015; Meares and Hatcher 2018). Additionally, aligning governance structures, fiscal policies, and service delivery frameworks can be administratively complex and resource-intensive (Cohen and Cohn 2014; Goodman and Leland 2013).

Political resistance is another common obstacle. Failed consolidation efforts often highlight insufficient stakeholder engagement, ineffective campaign strategies, and inadequate political consensus (Rosenbaum and Kammerer 1974; Leland and Thurmaier 2004). Even successful consolidations may encounter post-merger challenges, such as labor disputes, increased service costs, and unforeseen expenditures, which can erode anticipated benefits (Savitch, Vogel, and Ye 2010; Segedy and Lyons 2001). These issues underscore the need for comprehensive planning and robust stakeholder engagement throughout the consolidation process.

Methodology

This study evaluates the fiscal effects of the 2014 consolidation of Macon and Bibb County, Georgia, focusing specifically on changes in revenue base diversification. The analysis uses a mixed-method approach combining descriptive trend analysis, comparative benchmarking, and quasi-experimental modeling. The primary goal is to determine whether the consolidation led to statistically and substantively meaningful changes in the county's fiscal structure, particularly in terms of reliance on diverse revenue sources.

Data and Variables

The study employs a panel dataset spanning from 2006 to 2023 for both Macon-Bibb County (treatment group) and Columbus-Muscogee County (comparison group). Fiscal year 2014 is excluded from all analyses due to its transitional status: consolidation took effect midway through FY2014, producing a partial financial record that blends pre- and post-consolidation structures. To avoid measurement bias or artificial structural breaks, the analysis jumps from 2013 to 2015.

Fiscal data are primarily drawn from each county's Annual Comprehensive Financial Reports (ACFRs), budget summaries, and audited financial statements. These sources provide annual totals and categorical breakdowns of revenue. Additional socioeconomic controls—including annual population estimates, unemployment rates, and median household income—are obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Economic Analysis. Intergovernmental revenues (state and federal transfers) are also included to account for external fiscal inflows.

The key dependent variable is revenue-based diversification, measured annually using the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI). The HHI is calculated as the sum of squared revenue shares for each revenue category (e.g., property tax, sales tax, charges for services) and scaled by 10,000. Lower HHI values indicate greater revenue diversification and a more balanced fiscal structure. This measure is widely used in public finance to assess fiscal risk and concentration (Chernick and Reschovsky 2003; Swianiewicz and Lukomska 2019).

Additional outcome variables examined in the descriptive analysis include both aggregate and disaggregated revenue measures. The aggregate indicators consist of total revenue and total tax revenue, capturing the overall fiscal capacity of each county. The disaggregated sources encompass specific revenue categories such as property taxes, sales taxes, franchise taxes, insurance premium taxes, charges for services, licenses and permits, and fines, allowing for a more detailed assessment of shifts in the composition of the revenue base over time.

All revenue streams are analyzed both in absolute dollar terms and as proportions of total revenue to assess compositional changes over time.

Analytical Techniques

To estimate the fiscal effects of consolidation, the study begins with descriptive comparisons of revenue patterns before and after the 2014 unification of Macon and Bibb County. This includes visual trend analysis and comparisons of average revenue shares across the two periods. To strengthen causal inference, a comparative framework is employed by including Muscogee County—home to Georgia's only other consolidated city-county government—as a control unit. Columbus-Muscogee has maintained unified operations since 1971 and shares broadly similar socioeconomic characteristics with Macon-Bibb, making it a suitable counterfactual for isolating consolidation-related effects from broader fiscal trends.

To formally assess causal impacts, a Comparative Interrupted Time Series (CITS) model is used. CITS is a quasi-experimental method that compares pre- and post-intervention trends between treated and untreated units. In this context, the model estimates the effect of the 2014 consolidation on revenue diversification by comparing Macon-Bibb (treated) to Muscogee (control), while controlling for time trends, group-specific differences, and interactions between treatment and time.

The model is specified as follows:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{Time}_t + \beta_2 \cdot \text{Post}_t + \beta_3 \cdot \text{MaconBibb}_i + \beta_4 \cdot (\text{Time}_t \times \text{Post}_t) + \beta_5 \cdot (\text{MaconBibb}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + \beta_6 \cdot (\text{MaconBibb}_i \times \text{Time}_t \times \text{Post}_t) + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Where:

1. Y_{it} denotes the dependent variable (e.g., revenue diversification) for a given county at time t ;
2. Time_t is a continuous time trend variable ranging from 1 (2006) to 17 (2023), with 2014 omitted, capturing the overall secular trend;
3. Post_t is a binary indicator coded 1 for years 2015–2023 and 0 for years 2006–2013, marking the post-consolidation period;
4. MaconBibb_i is a county indicator coded 1 for Macon-Bibb County (treated group) and 0 for Muscogee County (control group);
5. $\text{Time}_t \times \text{Post}_t$ is an interaction term capturing any change in the time trend after 2014 for both counties;
6. $\text{MaconBibb}_i \times \text{Post}_t$ captures the short-term or immediate level effect of consolidation on Macon-Bibb relative to the control;
7. $\text{MaconBibb}_i \times \text{Time}_t \times \text{Post}_t$ captures the long-term or differential trend effect (i.e., change in slope) for Macon-Bibb in the post-consolidation period;
8. ε_t is the error term.

Interpretation of coefficients is as follows:

1. β_0 : baseline intercept for Muscogee in 2006
2. β_1 : pre-consolidation trend shared by both counties
3. β_2 : general post-2014 level shift for Muscogee
4. β_3 : baseline difference between Macon-Bibb and Muscogee
5. β_4 : change in slope for Muscogee after 2014
6. β_5 : short-term effect of consolidation (level difference in 2015)
7. β_6 : long-term effect of consolidation (difference in post-2014 slopes)

The post-consolidation trend for Macon-Bibb is given by the sum $\beta_1 + \beta_4 + \beta_6$, while the post-2014 trend for Muscogee is $\beta_1 + \beta_4$. The coefficient β_6 thus isolates the incremental slope change due to consolidation.

To ensure validity, robust standard errors are used to correct for heteroskedasticity and potential autocorrelation in the error terms. Where appropriate, sensitivity analyses are performed using alternative time codings and model specifications to verify the robustness of the estimated effects.

Results

This section presents findings in three stages: (1) revenue structure trends, (2) comparison with Muscogee County, and (3) regression results from the CITS models.

Table 1. Revenue Diversification by Year

Year	Property Taxes %	Sales Taxes %	Other Taxes %	Inter-governmental %	Charge %	License %	Fine %	Total Revenues (in million)
2006	60.73	16.41	3.36	3.43	7.42	0.86	2.81	111.29
2007	59.03	16.94	2.55	5.52	6.80	0.76	3.27	110.86
2008	61.56	15.69	2.06	4.47	7.03	0.79	3.00	115.12
2009	60.99	17.22	2.13	3.59	7.57	1.15	2.94	100.28
2010	62.52	18.00	2.08	2.40	7.89	1.21	3.28	93.27
2011	58.66	18.4	3.80	2.25	8.29	1.32	2.99	100.08
2012	62.41	16.93	3.18	2.20	7.50	1.25	2.44	105.40
2013	63.51	12.34	3.30	3.94	7.38	2.10	2.66	103.48
2015	50.29	20.68	16.64	0.88	4.35	2.36	1.55	183.15
2016	47.13	21.50	18.62	0.90	4.75	2.84	1.31	172.22
2017	46.61	21.09	18.94	1.14	4.93	2.81	1.28	168.48
2018	50.36	20.46	17.25	0.99	4.39	2.90	1.09	182.40
2019	53.19	19.63	16.39	1.12	3.87	2.26	0.93	197.81
2020	53.11	19.36	17.00	1.18	3.53	2.58	0.90	198.44
2021	53.17	19.85	16.41	1.25	3.52	2.57	0.91	201.64
2022	46.94	28.66	15.17	1.43	3.27	2.29	0.90	214.22
2023	40.53	35.80	13.82	1.08	3.01	2.03	0.73	235.38

Overview of Revenue Structure Pre- and Post-Consolidation

An examination of Macon-Bibb County’s revenue structure before and after the 2014 consolidation reveals substantial changes in both composition and growth. **Table 1** provides annual data on key revenue sources and their proportions of total revenue from 2006 to 2023, excluding 2014 due to its status as a partial fiscal year following the mid-year implementation of the consolidation. The data in this table allow for a longitudinal comparison of the county’s fiscal structure across two distinct periods: pre-consolidation (2006–2013) and post-consolidation (2015–2023).

During the pre-consolidation period, the county’s revenue base was highly concentrated, with property taxes comprising over 60% of total revenue in most years. This dominant share highlights a heavy reliance on a single, relatively static source of income and signals a lack of diversification in the county’s fiscal strategy. Sales taxes were consistently the second-largest contributor, ranging from 12% to 18% of total revenues, while other tax sources—such as franchise and insurance premium taxes—remained marginal. Non-tax revenues, including charges for services, licenses, fines, and permits, collectively contributed less than 10% of total revenues. Intergovernmental transfers, though present, represented a relatively modest portion of the county’s fiscal portfolio, underscoring a general dependence on property-based revenues during this era.

The post-consolidation period, beginning in 2015, marked a notable shift toward a more diversified and consumer-driven revenue structure. While property taxes continued to rise in absolute terms, their share of total revenue declined significantly—from 50.3% in 2015 to just 40.5% by 2023. At the same time, sales taxes increased substantially, from 20.7% in 2015 to 35.8% in 2023, ultimately surpassing property taxes as the county’s largest revenue source. This trend reflects both the success of local economic development efforts and the county’s improved ability to capture value from increased consumer activity. The growth in sales tax revenue points to a fiscal structure more aligned with economic cycles and local spending patterns, offering greater responsiveness to shifts in the business environment.

Beyond the two dominant tax sources, several secondary and previously underutilized revenue streams expanded meaningfully in the years following consolidation. Franchise and insurance premium taxes, for instance, showed consistent growth and became more significant contributors to the revenue base. Additionally, the emergence of new sources—such as alcoholic beverage taxes—reflects changes in local regulation and suggests that the consolidation enabled greater policy flexibility and fiscal innovation. Non-tax revenues, particularly charges for services, continued to provide stable supplemental income and proved especially valuable during years when tax-based revenues plateaued. For example, in 2017, despite relatively stagnant tax growth, non-tax revenues and intergovernmental transfers helped maintain overall fiscal stability.

A key indicator of the fiscal impact of consolidation is the trajectory of total revenue. Between 2006 and 2013, total county revenue remained relatively flat, averaging around \$81 million annually, with a peak of \$115 million in 2008, followed by a

sharp decline during the Great Recession. Following consolidation, however, total revenues rose dramatically—from \$183 million in 2015 to \$235 million by 2023. This sustained upward trend is attributable to several factors, including expansion of the tax base, improved revenue collection mechanisms, and the introduction of additional revenue streams. The structural reforms brought about by consolidation appear to have enhanced both the county’s administrative efficiency and its ability to capitalize on local economic growth.

The diversification of the revenue base is particularly evident when comparing the relative shares of property and sales taxes over time. Prior to consolidation, property taxes consistently accounted for close to two-thirds of total revenue, while sales taxes and other sources lagged far behind. By 2023, however, this balance had shifted significantly: sales taxes comprised 35.8% of total revenue, while the share of property taxes had declined to 40.5%. This rebalancing marks a decisive move away from reliance on a single source and toward a more balanced, resilient fiscal framework capable of weathering economic fluctuations.

The trends observed in **Table 1** collectively suggest that the consolidation had a transformative impact on Macon-Bibb County’s revenue structure. The decline in property tax dependence, concurrent rise in sales and secondary taxes, and overall increase in total revenues reflect a healthier, more adaptable financial position. The county’s enhanced ability to diversify its fiscal base has not only improved revenue stability but also positioned it for long-term sustainability in a dynamic economic environment. These changes, taken together, provide strong evidence that the 2014 consolidation achieved one of its central objectives: strengthening the financial foundation of local government through structural reform.

Comparative Analysis: Macon-Bibb vs. Columbus-Muscogee County

A comparative analysis of revenue concentration trends between Macon-Bibb County and Columbus-Muscogee County provides important context for evaluating the fiscal effects of consolidation. As shown in **Figure 1**, Macon-Bibb County experienced a marked and sustained decline in revenue concentration following its 2014 consolidation. This is evidenced by a downward trajectory in the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) beginning in 2015. The decline in HHI values over this period indicates a transition toward a more diversified revenue base, with reduced reliance on any single revenue source. This trend is consistent with the broader fiscal goals of consolidation, which include enhancing financial flexibility and resilience.

The post-consolidation years are particularly notable for the emergence and strengthening of secondary and non-tax revenue streams in Macon-Bibb. In years such as 2018 and 2023, franchise taxes, insurance premium taxes, and charges for services made up a larger share of total revenue compared to the pre-consolidation period. These shifts alleviated the county’s dependence on core sources like property and sales taxes and signaled a rebalancing of its fiscal structure. The increased role of these alternative revenues suggests that the consolidation may have enabled the county to broaden its revenue instruments and regulatory mechanisms, contributing to a more adaptable and stable fiscal environment.

Despite these positive developments, the comparative HHI data show that Macon-Bibb County’s revenue structure remains more concentrated than that of Muscogee County. Over the entire observation period, Macon-Bibb consistently recorded higher HHI values, indicating greater fiscal reliance on a narrower set of revenue streams. In contrast, Muscogee County has maintained relatively low and stable HHI scores—typically within the 2,500 to 3,000 range—which reflect a well-diversified and balanced fiscal profile. This contrast is not surprising given Muscogee’s long history of consolidated governance, dating back to 1971. Its extended institutional experience with unified budgeting and diversified tax strategies has likely contributed to the development of a more robust fiscal infrastructure over time.

Temporal patterns further illuminate key differences between the two counties. Macon-Bibb’s HHI shows more volatility, with significant peaks around 2010 and 2020—periods that likely correspond to increased reliance on a few key revenue sources in the wake of external shocks, such as the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic. A temporary dip in HHI in 2015 coincides with the transition year of consolidation, reflecting one-time adjustments in revenue policy and accounting practices. By contrast, Muscogee County’s HHI remained relatively steady throughout the study period, with only minor fluctuations. Even during economic disruptions, Muscogee’s revenue structure remained largely insulated from dramatic shifts, underscoring the long-term stability conferred by its institutional design and revenue management practices.

Interestingly, HHI values in Macon-Bibb began to decline more consistently starting around 2020. This trend may signal a growing commitment to revenue diversification and the effectiveness of post-consolidation fiscal strategies aimed at broadening the tax base. Policy initiatives to expand non-tax revenues, modernize revenue collection systems, and introduce new local taxes (e.g., beverage or service taxes) may be contributing to this gradual but promising shift. If sustained, this trajectory could help Macon-Bibb narrow the diversification gap with Muscogee over time and build a more resilient fiscal foundation.

Muscogee County, meanwhile, continues to exhibit fiscal steadiness. Although there was a slight uptick in its HHI around 2021—possibly due to pandemic-related economic impacts—its revenue base remains far more evenly distributed than Macon-Bibb’s. This consistency reinforces Muscogee’s role as a benchmark case for long-term revenue diversification under a consolidated government structure.

In summary, the comparative HHI analysis highlights both the progress and ongoing challenges facing Macon-Bibb County. The post-consolidation period brought measurable improvements in revenue diversification and fiscal capacity, but Macon-Bibb

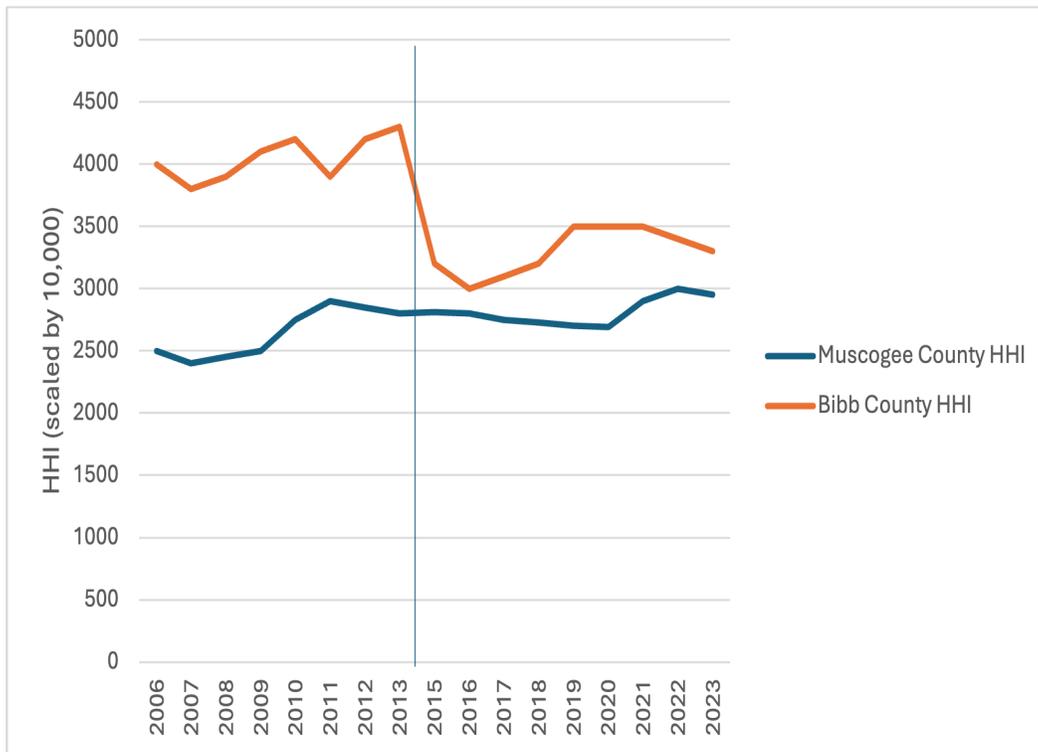


Figure 1. Comparative HHI Analysis: Macon-Bibb vs. Columbus-Muscogee County

still lags behind Muscogee in terms of structural balance and resilience. The findings suggest that while consolidation can catalyze important fiscal reforms, achieving the full benefits of a diversified revenue base likely requires sustained policy attention, administrative capacity, and time. The contrast between the two counties underscores the importance of institutional maturity in shaping long-term fiscal outcomes following structural governance reforms.

Comparative Interrupted Time Series Regression Analysis

Table 2 reports the results from two comparative interrupted time series (CITS) models assessing the impact of the 2014 Macon-Bibb consolidation on revenue base diversification, operationalized through the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI). Model 1 includes only the CITS specification, while Model 2 introduces additional covariates to control for population size, unemployment rate, and income.

In both models, the *Time* variable is positive and statistically significant (Model 1: $\beta = 62.293$, $p < .001$; Model 2: $\beta = 60.903$, $p = .007$), indicating a pre-consolidation upward trend in HHI—signifying increasing revenue concentration—for both counties. The *Post* indicator, capturing the general shift for Muscogee County after 2014, is not statistically significant, though Model 2 shows marginal significance ($\beta = 250.005$, $p = .093$), suggesting a modest upward shift in Muscogee’s HHI post-2014.

The coefficient for *MaconBibb* is large and statistically significant in both models (Model 1: $\beta = 1462.456$, $p < .001$; Model 2: $\beta = 2100.288$, $p < .001$), reflecting the higher baseline HHI for Macon-Bibb compared to Muscogee before consolidation.

Crucially, the interaction term *MaconBibb* \times *Post*, which captures the immediate or short-term effect of consolidation, is large and negative (Model 1: $\beta = -1002.765$, $p = .006$; Model 2: $\beta = -1007.548$, $p = .001$), indicating a significant drop in revenue concentration in Macon-Bibb immediately following consolidation. This sharp decline in HHI represents a marked improvement in revenue diversification.

The *Time* \times *Post* term is negative and statistically significant in both models (Model 1: $\beta = -37.922$, $p = .037$; Model 2: $\beta = -57.986$, $p = .010$), suggesting that Muscogee’s post-2014 revenue concentration trend flattened or slightly declined, perhaps reflecting broader statewide or structural changes unrelated to consolidation.

However, the three-way interaction term *MaconBibb* \times *Time* \times *Post*—which reflects the long-term slope change—is statistically insignificant in both models (Model 1: $\beta = -2.232$, $p = .932$; Model 2: $\beta = -7.101$, $p = .718$). This lack of significance implies that the post-consolidation trend in revenue diversification for Macon-Bibb County did not differ meaningfully from the pre-consolidation trend or from that of the comparison group, Muscogee County. In other words, while the county experienced an immediate and substantial improvement in revenue diversification following consolidation, there is

Table 2. Effects of Consolidation on Revenue Base Diversification (HHI)

Variable	Model 1 Coefficient	SE	P	Model 2 Coefficient	SE	P
Constant	2373.752	86.798	<.001	-1548.698	1193.619	.207
Time	62.293	14.157	<.001	60.903	20.501	.007
Post	164.850	151.227	.285	250.005	142.843	.093
MaconBibb	1462.456	86.735	<.001	2100.288	284.136	<.001
Time*Post	-37.922	17.264	.037	-57.986	20.883	.010
MaconBibb*Post	-1002.765	337.772	.006	-1007.548	269.399	.001
MaconBibb*Time*Post	-2.232	25.928	.932	-7.101	19.466	.718
Population	–	–	–	.011	.006	.086
Unemployment	–	–	–	-8.183	18.398	.660
Income	–	–	–	.036	.005	<.001
R-squared	.937			.961		
F-statistic	73.07			111.32		
Observations	34			34		

no statistical evidence to suggest that this improvement was sustained through a continued trajectory of diversification over time. The slope of the post-consolidation trend line essentially mirrors the pre-consolidation path, reinforcing the interpretation that the fiscal reform produced a one-time shift rather than an ongoing structural transformation.

Among the controls in Model 2, *income* shows a significant positive association with HHI ($\beta = 0.036$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher income levels are associated with greater revenue concentration. *Population* is marginally significant ($\beta = 0.011$, $p = .086$), while *unemployment* is not statistically significant.

These findings are visualized in **Figure 2**. Prior to 2014, both counties exhibited relatively stable or rising trends in HHI. After consolidation, Macon-Bibb experiences a sharp drop, consistent with the significant short-term effect, followed by a period of relative stability. Muscogee, by contrast, continues a gradual upward trend throughout the study period.

Overall, the evidence supports a clear and statistically significant immediate diversification effect following consolidation in Macon-Bibb County. However, the absence of a statistically significant long-term trend shift underscores the importance of differentiating between structural shocks and enduring change. The observed persistence of lower HHI levels in Macon-Bibb after 2014—without full reversion—may still suggest meaningful and lasting institutional reforms.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined the fiscal impact of the 2014 consolidation of Macon and Bibb County, Georgia, with particular emphasis on revenue-based diversification and long-term fiscal sustainability. Employing a comparative interrupted time series (CITS) design and panel data spanning nearly two decades, the analysis reveals a statistically significant short-term diversification effect immediately following consolidation. This was reflected in a sharp decline in the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI), indicating reduced reliance on a concentrated set of revenue sources. These findings are consistent with prior research highlighting the potential of structural reforms, such as consolidation, to improve fiscal flexibility and reduce dependence on traditional revenue streams (Carr and Feiock 1999; Rivenbark et al. 2010). However, the analysis finds no statistically significant change in the post-consolidation revenue diversification trend over time, suggesting that the initial fiscal improvements were not followed by sustained structural transformation. In other words, while consolidation produced measurable short-term benefits, there is no clear evidence that it fundamentally altered the county's long-term fiscal trajectory.

The shift in Macon-Bibb's fiscal profile—away from heavy reliance on property taxes and toward increased sales taxes, franchise fees, and insurance premium taxes—indicates that consolidation provided the institutional flexibility to explore alternative revenue instruments (Baum and O'Malley 2018; McCabe and Pavlakovich-Kochi 2014). The accompanying rise in total revenues—from \$183 million in 2015 to \$235 million in 2023—further underscores consolidation's role in enhancing the county's revenue-generating capacity.

Regression results from the CITS models reinforce the descriptive trends. The statistically significant and negative interaction term for *MaconBibb* \times *Post* confirms a sharp and immediate diversification effect. However, the statistically insignificant three-way interaction (*MaconBibb* \times *Time* \times *Post*) suggests that the post-consolidation slope of revenue diversification in Macon-Bibb did not significantly differ from that of Muscogee County, the control unit. This nuance supports Miller's (2002) argument that while structural reforms may generate immediate fiscal benefits, their long-term success often hinges on sustained policy and administrative follow-through.

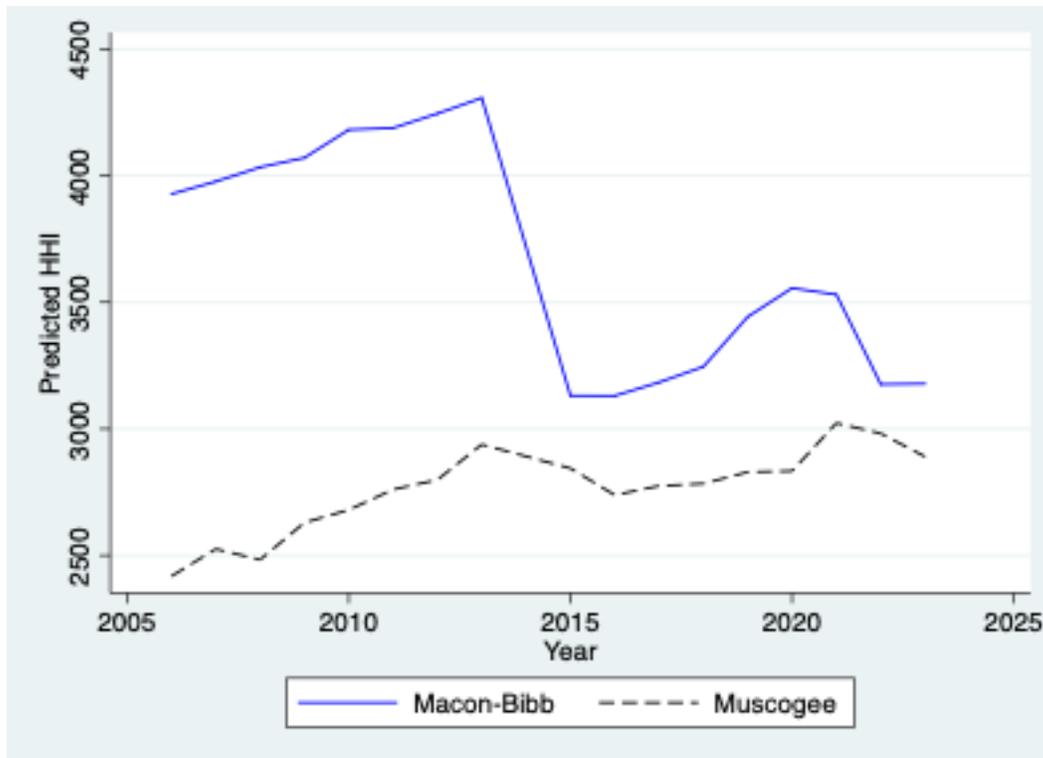


Figure 2. Predicted HHI Over Year

The comparative analysis with Muscogee County—Georgia’s long-established consolidated jurisdiction—offers an important benchmark. Muscogee’s consistently lower HHI values reflect a mature and stable revenue system built over decades, reinforcing the view that the full benefits of consolidation accrue gradually over time (Savitch, Vogel, and Ye 2010; Leland and Thurmaier 2004). In contrast, while Macon-Bibb has made measurable progress, its revenue diversification remains less stable and more concentrated, highlighting the ongoing challenges of institutional development following consolidation.

Socioeconomic control variables, including population, unemployment, and income, yielded mixed findings. The significant positive association between income and HHI suggests that higher-income jurisdictions may rely more heavily on stable, traditional revenue sources like property taxes (Chernick and Reschovsky 2003). This finding also supports the notion that external economic conditions, while relevant, do not fully explain the observed changes in diversification—highlighting the central role of internal governance reforms.

As with any policy evaluation, this study faces limitations. The analysis relies on publicly reported fiscal data, which may not fully capture changes in revenue administration or compliance mechanisms. Moreover, the singular focus on Macon-Bibb County constrains generalizability, though the use of Muscogee County as a comparator improves the internal validity of the findings. Future research could expand this analysis to include a broader sample of consolidated and non-consolidated jurisdictions, enabling deeper insights into the contextual conditions that facilitate long-term fiscal improvement.

In conclusion, the Macon-Bibb consolidation resulted in clear and statistically significant short-term improvements in revenue diversification and fiscal capacity. While long-term trends remain less definitive, the absence of a return to pre-consolidation levels suggests durable, if incomplete, progress. These findings align with the broader literature on local government consolidation, which identifies both the promise and complexity of achieving lasting fiscal reform (Boyne 1996; Carr and Feiock 2004; Leland and Johnson 2004).

Importantly, the results highlight that structural reform alone is insufficient to ensure lasting fiscal transformation. To translate initial gains into enduring improvements, local governments must adopt deliberate policy and administrative strategies that reinforce diversification. One key recommendation is the development of a formal long-term revenue diversification plan that benchmarks progress, evaluates the elasticity and volatility of revenue sources, and pursues targeted shifts away from overly concentrated tax bases. Exploring underutilized tools such as local option sales taxes, fees for services, and interlocal agreements can broaden the fiscal base without imposing disproportionate burdens on residents. Equally vital are investments in administrative infrastructure—such as improved forecasting, financial transparency, and modernization of collection systems—which can enhance compliance, stabilize revenue flows, and support informed decision-making.

Muscogee County's experience provides further policy guidance. Its decades-long trajectory of stable diversification suggests that institutional maturity, consistent fiscal policy, and professionalized budgeting practices play essential roles in sustaining reform outcomes. Macon-Bibb can look to Muscogee's example to formalize fiscal audits, embed performance metrics, and cultivate a culture of strategic financial management. In sum, consolidation may offer a pathway to fiscal reform, but its success depends on sustained administrative investment, adaptive policy tools, and long-term political commitment.

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Owning Womanhood in the Republican Party: Examining Gender Ownership in Political Campaigns

Catherine Funk¹

¹Department of Political Science, Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, cfunk@abac.edu

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to develop a method of measuring ownership of the concept of gender among political candidates. Gender, much like traits and issues, is a concept that can be associated with a candidate in an attempt to connect with voters. Gender ownership is the ability of a candidate to connect with gendered assumptions, including the synergistic elements of experience, qualities, traits, and issues associated with a gender, which may grant electoral success. This research utilizes content analysis to quantify this previously unquantified attribute and then identify trends regarding the level of ownership among candidates for elections at the gubernatorial, House, and senatorial levels for the years 2006 – 2014 by coding 9,860 unique candidate advertisements. Gender Ownership does not seem to be based purely upon electoral contest nor party, but is a combination of electoral contest, party, and perceived sex.

The Question of Gender

While prior research indicates that perceived sex, typically defined as gender, plays a role in the opportunities a candidate is afforded, perceived competence by voters, and assumptions regarding traits and issues, there has been no examination of whether candidates connect with the assumed gender associated with their perceived sex. Political Science has largely assumed that a candidate does nothing in regard to managing their gender perception. The level of connection or disconnection between perceived sex and the management of gender perception is the level of gender ownership of the candidate. Much like trait ownership, issue ownership, and even party ownership before, how much a candidate owns their gender can have electoral consequences. Considering that candidates need to connect with voters to mobilize voters to vote for them, gender can be an element that can help candidates connect with voters that transcends traits and issues. This study examines the unprocessed message or the initially crafted message of the candidate through traits, issues, and gender presented in the advertisements to better understand the totality of the message the candidate is sending, rather than focusing on the message as it is received by voters. While future research should examine the success of these messages, a comprehensive examination of the candidate's ownership of issues, traits, and gender is thin in political science research.

The Sex Gap

Women entered the national political realm in 1917 with Jeannette Rankin (R-MT). Subsequently, women were fully admitted to the political realm in 1920. However, as Firebaugh and Chen (1995) noted, women did not take to the political realm immediately, individually or collectively. In the 100 years since full admittance, women across the country have held varying levels of elected political office. Though women, on average, constitute approximately 50% of the adult population in the United States, women do not constitute 50% of elected offices. As women have struggled to define themselves politically, political science has struggled to explain the lack of parity in politics. There has been extensive research into many aspects of possible explanations and possible remedies for the disparity, which are as varied as they are numerous. Some of the highlights of this research include focusing on the gender gap in politics, voter participation (Manza & Brooks, 1998), the gender gap in partisan voting (Mattei & Mattei, 1998), and the interest level or knowledge gap (Dow, 2009). From the perspective of women being engaged in politics or not voting for their interests, research examined the candidates — including factors such as perceived candidate quality (Lawless, 2004) — and the progressive ambition of women (Fulton, et al, 2006). From this research, there was a progression to an examination of potential factors in such areas regarding roadblocks for women obtaining elective office (Fox & Lawless, 2014), media attention of women in politics (Duerst-Lahti, 2006), campaigning (Kahn, 1993), female incumbency (Palmer & Simon, 2005), and, in general, why women are not found in political office (Fox & Lawless, 2004). Political science has researched aspects of the differences in candidates without addressing the fundamental character differences between the genders. Frequently, the research does not distinguish between gender and sex for male and female candidates alike.

Knowledge Gap

One area of focus has been a lack of attention by women to politics. It has been noted that women seem less knowledgeable and less attentive to politics. Research questioned the causes of this knowledge gap, as to whether it was an inherent predisposition due to gender or whether there were other causes. Dow (2009) focused his studies on the potential causes of the gender knowledge gap in regards to politics. Of specific interest was how much of the gap was based upon observable characteristics like education or employment, and how much was the result of returns on equivalent characteristics (Dow, 2009). As women typically score as being less knowledgeable in politics compared with men, understanding the cause of this gap is important for understanding female involvement in the political system. Based upon Dow's research, characteristics have the same impact for men and women, but only account for a third of the gap. The other two-thirds are the result of returns on socialization and education (Dow, 2009). Women do not gain as much in socialization as men do in education regarding political knowledge. Women are typically not socialized to be attentive to politics, whereas men are. However, it has been found that women pay more attention to politics when a woman is involved (High-Pippert and Comer, 2008). Women may not vote for a female candidate simply because she is a female, but they will pay more attention to what she has to say. The gender knowledge gap, in this situation, narrows. This additional attention can be mobilized for electoral support and political action. Unfortunately, women are late to the political game and have fewer candidates running, thus women still have less of an incentive to pay attention compared with men. While inattention may not be gender inherent, the gender of the candidates does affect attention. Since having female candidates improves attention to politics, the gender knowledge gap can be reduced by having more female candidates. This remedy to the lack of parity has led to research regarding the reasons why there are not more female candidates; thus, examining what obstacles may hinder female candidates.

Obstacles to Electoral Office

Jennifer Lawless has worked both individually and with Richard Fox to discuss many of the issues that face female candidates. One obstacle is the recruitment of female candidates; namely, that party leadership recruits male candidates but does not recruit female candidates with the same enthusiasm, particularly in the Republican Party (Fox and Lawless, 2010). As female candidates recognize that the party has resources that are not as available to an individual candidate, female candidates are less likely to run without the support of the party. According to prior research, women do not exhibit the same political ambition as men (Costantini, 1990). Conventional wisdom has placed the cause of the lower ambition on familial responsibilities; according to Fox and Lawless's (2014) research, other obstacles are more likely the cause of the lower ambition, though familial responsibilities may account for the underrepresentation of eligible women in the candidate pool. As candidates, in general, and female candidates specifically, struggle to raise sufficient money to campaign, a lack of party support can effectively end a campaign before it starts. As was noted earlier, this has led to several PACs that are specifically geared toward funding female candidates. Lack of party support is often aided by a perception of a lack of qualification. The perception is based upon gender-based assumptions. These gender-based assumptions have often hindered women, who, early on, had to present themselves as having the more masculine attributes to be seen as qualified candidates. Women are seen, and see themselves, as being less qualified for office, even if they have the same credentials as a male candidate (Fox and Lawless, 2014). Additionally, female candidates are often perceived as not being as adept in the areas of leadership, economics, and defense as compared with male candidates (Lawless, 2004), though they are often regarded as having more compassion and being more competent in the areas of women's issues, education, and healthcare (Lawless, 2004). Gender-based assumptions regarding qualification and adeptness have reduced party recruitment, which has led to fewer female candidates running, particularly women running on their gender. Masculinity has been perceived as preferable in politics as masculinity is perceived as being indicative of desirable traits in leadership, economic knowledge, and strength in defense.

The Influence of Party

While parties may not recruit female candidates at the same level as male candidates, partisanship still plays an important role in the campaign. Manza and Brooks (1998) examined the causes of the gender gap, particularly in relation to partisanship. They noted that prior research indicated that female voting turnout was lower than male voting turnout until 1980, when the situation reversed, such that women have a higher voter turnout compared with men. Additionally, the female voters were voting for Democratic candidates. However, they wanted to know the causes for the support of females for Democratic candidates. Their results were that both the rise of feminist consciousness and the increase of females in the paid labor force, as well as the incumbent obstacles, led to support of Democrats who supported policies that were beneficial in reducing the workforce difficulties. Mattei and Mattei (1998) likewise conclude that sex does influence partisan identification, namely that females are more likely to support the Democratic Party. This trend has become more polarized, with women identifying more strongly as Democrats while men identify more strongly as Republicans in the elections of 1994 and 1996. With females being more likely to identify as Democrats, they are also more likely to run as Democrats. While the literature has supported the result

that “when women run, they win as often as men,” there is an incomplete picture regarding the environment in which a woman competes. Palmer and Simon (2005) examined the environment in which female candidates, particularly incumbents, compete. The results are noteworthy in that female incumbents may win as often as male incumbents, but their environment is different. Female incumbents will inspire women from both parties to run for the incumbents’ seats, which leads to increased competition for those seats. The fact that there is a female incumbent for a seat indicates that the district is willing to vote for a female candidate, motivating women to compete where they perceive an opportunity for success. Thus, a female incumbent faces a more competitive environment that includes more women. This can already be seen in anticipation of the campaign for 2020. In Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s (D-NY) home district, there is already a female Republican who has indicated that she will run against incumbent Rep. Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY). Whether the oppositional candidate(s) is viable is less of an issue as compared with the fact that her presence will create a more competitive environment compared with the environment male incumbents face, particularly among women in the electorate as they struggle with the question of how to cast their ballots.

Ownership in Campaigns

Like all political candidates, once the decision to run is made, the next step is to communicate a message to the electorate. For female candidates, this has often meant overcoming the gender assumptions associated with being a woman, as noted by Senator Hutchison (R-TX). When campaigning, the candidate crafts the campaign message deemed desirable for political success. Fortunately, modern campaign methods can provide a more complete picture of candidate campaigns through television advertisements. Candidates are able to provide visual and verbal cues to constituents in a condensed manner. Television advertisements contain more than just words about issue stances or candidate traits. They include images, music, and words designed to help viewers make associations between the candidate and their desired message. According to Goss (1995), “information is defined as any input that the person attends to for the purpose of reducing uncertainty or confirming prior knowledge” (Goss, 1995). Information can be “facts, feelings, statistics, or whatever” (Goss, 1995). Viewers incorporate “knowledge, feelings, and expectations as we react and think” about the campaign advertisements viewed (Goss, 1995). Furthermore, Goss states that “as you perceive something, you decide not only what it means, but how you feel about it as well . . . [Y]our meanings and feelings create expectations. Thus, you see what you expect to see” (Goss, 1995). This information is then processed into opinions about the candidates. However, what the constituents perceive is not necessarily the message the candidate intended. This message, for women, will need to focus on issues and traits that can overcome the predisposed assumption of incompetence. While Kahn (1993) found that male and female candidates largely campaign in a similar manner, there were some differences. Both genders try to focus on issues, though without specifics. Naturally, both genders focus on their own personal strengths. Women focus more on issues in their ads compared with men. Additionally, the spotlighted issues are different: male candidates focus on the economy, while female candidates focus on social issues. This is a common breakdown. Finally, the media coverage presents female candidates in a stereotypical fashion, ignoring many of the female candidates’ trait appeals regarding competency and leadership. Dabelko and Herrnson (1997) support many of these results by finding that male and female candidates have similar reasons for running, accumulate comparable resources, and apply similar strategies. The primary difference is in the issues. Herrnson, Lay, and Stokes (2002) provide the strategic advice that female candidates who have succeeded have utilized the gender stereotype as an asset rather than a liability by stressing issues that are seen favorably by voters. Issue ownership is an important aspect to political campaigns as issues can be important differentiating factors among politicians. Issue ownership is nuanced, as noted by Walgrave, Lefevre, and Tresch (2012). Issue ownership has both a competence and associative dimension, both of which affect voter choice, though in different ways (Walgrave, et al, 2012). They define associative ownership as “the spontaneous association between issues and parties in the minds of voters resulting from a history of attention” (Walgrave, et al., 2012). Competence issue ownership, the more commonly studied, is “the belief that a party is best placed to tackle the issue” (Walgrave, et al., 2012). Additionally, issue ownership or distancing can be affected by agenda-setting decisions by candidates, as noted by Damore (2004). Candidates make decisions on whether to own issues or distance themselves from issues based upon campaign success and voter interest (Damore, 2004). Thus, candidates may choose to address issues that are atypical for their party because it may increase electoral success (Damore, 2004).

Media Play

While candidates can control the message they create, they cannot completely control what media outlets do once the message has been sent. Duerst-Lahti (2006) discusses how media play an important role in enhancing the visibility of women in political campaigns. Media outlets mention who might be running, who could run, and who could win. By discussing certain candidates, the media present the aspirant as a potential candidate, a potential nominee, and a potential President. Mentioning the candidate presents them as being a viable candidate. Failure to speak of women is to present female aspirants as not being an actual candidate, even if highly qualified (Duerst-Lahti, 2006). Meanwhile, Lawless, Hayes, and Baitinger present that what a candidate wears does matter in elections. Negative commentary by media outlets leads to the electorate evaluating the

candidate as less professional. Both male and female candidates pay this price (Lawless, Hayes, Baitinger, 2014), though if a female candidate does not get mentioned frequently by the press and those few mentions are critical of her attire, then one might wonder if her electorate support may be affected. Thus, while a candidate may be qualified and have an excellent campaign message, media outlets can make a candidate appear less viable, and this seems to particularly affect female candidates.

While the results of prior research indicate a disparity in all of these areas, no single aspect seems to conclusively answer the questions regarding female candidates. While it is clear that there is a strong bias against women in public office and that female candidates have obstacles to overcome, the results have been largely inconclusive for the central question. The answers seem to indicate that the differences in success are the result of normative and social expectations of women in the United States (Lawless, 2004).

The Intersection of Societal Norms and Politics

The social norms and expectations for women, particularly in politics, are that women are more concerned with social issues, such as education, health care, women, equity, poverty, children, and family (Lawless, 2004). Historically, there is support for these assumptions, as Congresswomen during the Cold War argued that “improved economic and educational opportunities would best protect Americans’ freedoms” (Wasniewski et al., 2006). Additionally, women in Congress have routinely been on committees related to education, healthcare, and women and children. This tendency confirms the perception and creates a similar expectation that women are adept in these areas, but less adept in areas including economics, national defense, and crime (Lawless, 2004). These are perceptions and expectations that female candidates have to both work with and work against during campaigns. The Democratic Party over the last fifty years has positioned itself as the party of equity, social justice, reducing poverty, and championing education. Because of the preconceptions of the domain of women, many women identify as Democrats, finding the positioning of the Democratic Party to be complementary to their own positions and expectations. Women then mobilize support for these Democratic issues throughout the campaign season. Therefore, many successful female candidates have found success through the Democratic Party over the last twenty years.

There is an expectation that candidates will embrace and emphasize those issues that are generally identified as strengths for their party, their gender, and themselves. For female candidates, who are often Democratic, the issues of party frequently align with the issues of gender. Furthermore, Koch (2000) found that citizens do “infer candidates’ issue positions, personality traits, and issue competencies, in addition to their ideological orientations” based upon their gender (427).

Thus, gender does play a part in the interplay between candidates and the electorate. While issue ownership has been studied, there is a question of whether women own their gender, separate from the issues, and whether owning their gender is beneficial. With an increasing number of women running for elected office from both parties, there is the possibility of testing whether women actually own their gender and how ownership may be done. According to prior research, women are just as strategic as men are when they run for elected office (Lawless, 2004). While political scientists would expect women to run a different campaign from men, due to prior research, there has been little opportunity to test these expectations because of a general lack of female candidates running for public office. On a national stage, women would likely want to utilize any potential strategic advantage, including their gender. Typically, women are more likely to vote than men are in recent years, and since women comprise approximately fifty percent of the national population, gender could be an advantage to a female candidate if there is a gender-specific voting bloc or if the female candidate can connect with a sufficient number of women in the electorate. While specific information regarding issues may not be expected, candidates are expected to take stances on the various issues that are seen as relevant during the campaign cycle (Kahn, 1993). A candidate is also expected to present credentials and qualities relevant to the position being sought.

Meanwhile, visual symbols can cue the viewers as to stances that the candidate is taking on issues or connect a candidate with a certain concept. Additionally, candidates are likely to engage in attack behavior (Kaid and Boydston, 2009). As an example, for candidates, the issue that is usually discussed the most in any election is the economy. Candidates are likely to discuss their perspective on the economy and their plan for it. Then the candidates are likely to attack the current economic policy and the opposition’s proposed plan. Indeed, the economy is an issue that can make or break a candidate. Unfortunately for female candidates, gender stereotypes have identified women as being less competent or knowledgeable in economics and financial matters than men (Lawless 2004). This can handicap the female candidate. Therefore, candidates will focus on and embrace those issues that are strategically advantageous, whether by party, gender, issue, or particular to the candidate’s constituents. For female candidates, perceptions of women and the party often align advantageously through the Democratic Party. Prior research has indicated that women who accentuate women’s issues during the campaign gain a strategic advantage (Herrnson, Lay, Stokes, 2003). Additionally, women would want to accentuate many of the same elements as men, if they are advantageous to the woman (Dabelko and Herrnson, 1997).

However, a female candidate may be constrained by expectations for women, particularly as those expectations apply to public office (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; Alexander and Andersen, 1993). Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) further noted that traits alone do not account for perceptions of competency; gender was involved. Issue ownership can be an important element

when the gender gap is involved. Since 1980, there has been a noticeable difference in how men and women vote, generally referred to as the gender gap. While the cause and aspects of the gap has been extensively studied, of note in this situation is that this difference in voting behavior can have a defining effect on who wins an election. Therefore, it behooves candidates to mind the gap and campaign accordingly. Schaffner (2005) found that when the gender gap was significant, then candidates, particularly Democratic candidates, were more likely to campaign on women's issues, therefore owning the women's issues and connecting with women in the electorate. Since Democratic candidates were more likely to incorporate women's issues into their campaigns, women were more likely to vote for Democratic candidates, even while the vote choice of men was unaffected (Schaffner, 2005). Huddy and Terkildsen (Gender Stereotypes, 1993) examined the issue of perceived competency and found that much of the perception is based upon gender-trait stereotypes and that masculine traits were of greater benefit in a broader range of issues compared with feminine traits. Additionally, when there is a lack of knowledge about the candidates, the electorate will utilize gender role attitudes in evaluating a candidate, based upon research by Alexander and Andersen (1993). Along this line, voters attribute certain leadership qualities and issue skills based upon gender, if little is known about the candidates.

However, these aspects have been studied as separate components rather than parts of a larger dynamic. Herrnson, Lay, & Stokes (2003) examined the interplay of gender and issue ownership by female candidates. This effort is a valuable base for understanding the interaction of gender and issues, making this examination noteworthy and valuable in understanding female candidates' campaign strategies. Like many other prior research studies, it focuses on issues and whether women own women's issues in their campaigns. The researchers specifically state that the study was not to examine the impact of gender, and gender was removed as a variable. The finding that women are more successful running as women focuses on only one aspect of being a woman: issues that are assumed to be gender relevant. As was seen in Colorado in the 1890s, women do not always agree on issues. Thus, a focus on issues for female candidates is an incomplete but beneficial picture. Several studies have examined the constituent perceptions of candidates, sometimes addressing the interactive quality gender has on the aspects of traits and issues. Frequently, the research focuses on two of the qualities of traits and issues, even to the exclusion of gender. Those same studies focus on the voters' perceptions of the candidates in relation to issues and/or traits. The prior research has focused on the processed message and its effect on electoral success. The prior research has defined trait and issue ownership by what a candidate says during the course of the campaign and how the candidate associates him/her-self with traits and issues. Subsequently, the research examines how voters perceive the association and, thus, connect the association with the candidate. This connection between the candidate and the issue/trait is then defined as the candidate owning the trait/issue. However, gender is not defined this way. Gender has been defined purely as the perceived sex of the candidate. Research, thus far, has not examined how or whether candidates make similar associations between themselves and their gender. The candidate makes that connection in much the same way as with issues and traits, with a similar possible effect of whether the voters perceive the candidate as the gender associated with his/her perceived sex.

While prior research indicates that perceived sex, typically defined as gender, plays a role in opportunities a candidate is afforded, perceived competence by voters, and assumptions regarding traits and issues, there has not been an examination of whether candidates connect with the assumed gender associated with their perceived sex. Considering that candidates need to connect with voters to mobilize voters to vote for them, gender can be an element that can help candidates connect with voters that transcends traits and issues.

Examining Gender Ownership

This study examines the unprocessed message or the initially crafted message of the candidate through traits, issues, and gender presented in the advertisements to better understand the totality of the message the candidate is sending, rather than focusing on the message as it is received by voters. While future research should examine the success of these messages, a comprehensive examination of the candidate's ownership of issues, traits, and gender is thin in political science research. This study aims to bridge the gap. Previous research on candidates has examined issues and trait ownership, often from the perspective of the voting population, followed by delving into whether or not the candidate was successful in gaining elected office. Trait ownership is the "connection between the issues 'owned' by a political party" and "the public perceptions of the personal attributes of the party's candidates" (Hayes, 909). These trait perceptions are "created and reinforced by issue ownership campaigning" (Hayes, 909). Hayes (2005) states that "trait ownership provides a baseline for expectations, and trait trespassing can yield an electoral benefit" (909). When the research examines female candidates, it's often in regard to why female candidates have not achieved parity with their male counterparts. The concept of gender is often limited to the sex of the candidates. If discussed any further, gender is examined through the lens of traits the candidate owns or issues the candidate discusses, particularly in relation to expectations due to the candidate's sex. However, there is an aspect that bears further consideration: whether candidates "own" their gender. Politics had been dominated by men until the last hundred years, yet in those hundred years, women have not reached parity with men in the political realm, either as candidates or elected officials. Early female candidates were praised for not making a point of being a female candidate or overly focusing on women

once elected. In the early years, women were verbally — if not electorally — rewarded for distancing themselves from their gender, if not their sex. Yet as female candidates pursue parity in politics, the question lingers as to whether candidates, female and male alike, benefit from owning their gender, not just their sex, in their campaign messages. Gender, in many ways, is a shortcut for many voters. Gender assumptions give voters a preconceived idea about the ideology of a candidate, the traits of the candidate, the capabilities of the candidate, and issue preferences of that candidate, all without knowing any more than the perceived sex of that candidate. Frequently, gender assumptions are addressed in current literature as gender stereotypes. While stereotype may be an appropriate term, the word stereotype frequently has a negative connotation and could obscure both the positive and negative ideas, traits, issues, and connections that a person may attempt to utilize; whereas, the word assumption may allow greater cognitive ease regarding a broader array of associations. Additionally, gender ownership allows the candidate to connect with others who identify with the same gender by expressing an experiential quality of understanding that gender because of being that same gender. Gender ownership is an examination of whether candidates lean into those assumptions and whether those assumptions are sufficiently acceptable to the electorate to grant electoral success.

Gender ownership is perceived by voters based on the message crafted and communicated by the candidate. It is a synergistic quality that is more than the sum of the individual qualities, traits, and issues of a candidate. Previous research typically focused on parts of the whole: traits, sex, issues. This research posits that a candidate owns his/her gender much as parties or candidates own issues or traits through association with and utilization of all of these components in a campaign message. Through television advertisements, candidates can utilize verbal messages to communicate character traits or stances on political issues that the candidate wants voters to remember. Since television advertisements include a visual component, candidates can include visual cues to associate themselves with traits or issues. The medium allows a candidate to communicate a complex message through both verbal and visual cues. The associations made through the verbal and visual messages help the candidate to own issues and traits in the minds of voters. The visual image confirms the verbal message. If the candidate shows him/herself helping a child in a classroom while a verbal message speaks about education, then the candidate has not only associated him/herself with the issue of education, but they have also shown the trait of helpfulness and caring. These same associations can have a gender component. Prior research supports a gender component in how candidates are perceived, yet there has been no examination of how a candidate associates him/herself with his/her gender as opposed to treating sex and gender as the same attribute. Candidates can present themselves on-screen in ways associated with a certain sex, whether born that sex or not. However, the perceived sex is not necessarily the same as owning the related gender. Through the messages and associations the candidate crafts, the candidate can either draw closer to the expectations associated with their own presented sex or create distance from it and draw closer to the expectations of the other sex. This creates a measure of 58 gender ownership, namely, whether the candidate owns the expectations of their presented sex or not. This measure may fluctuate for each candidate based on the candidate's determination of what is strategically beneficial. A candidate can choose to present a message to be observed as owning traits and issues that are different from the expectations of his/her own gender and sex because doing so is seen as politically advantageous. For female candidates during much of the past hundred years, that has meant being perceived in a more masculine way, such as being "tough on crime" and "strong on defense" rather than "compassionate" or "caring." An example of this would be candidate Tammy Duckworth emphasizing her military service as credentials for understanding national defense and leadership capability. It behooved female candidates to distance themselves from being overly feminine, such as not wearing "frillies or hats on the House Floor" (Wasniewski, et al., 2006). They may have been women, but they were first Congressmen. In recent years, female candidates have been more willing to address issues important to women, such as abortion, education, and healthcare, in more nuanced ways. Women have presented themselves as more compassionate and have found political success in running "as women." A cursory glance supports that how women have run for political office has changed such that women appear to be more comfortable and successful than previously when they run "as women," which leads to an important underlying question: what does it mean to run "as women" and "as men?" Currently, there is no way to quantify the level of association a candidate creates between themselves and gender, as usually studies are limited to an examination of traits and issues, which are quantifiable as to whether a candidate mentions them. Previous research has limited itself to defining gender as the sex of a candidate. A gender ownership variable needs to account for the presented sex of the candidate, namely whether the candidate presents him/herself as male or female based upon sex expectations, but it also needs to account for issues, traits, and the gendered expectations to capture the greater nuance modern candidates face in campaigns. Women have utilized masculine talking points to be viewed as the preferred candidate, while men have emphasized feminine traits and issues for similar reasons, all depending upon what was strategically beneficial. Women may have dressed like women, but they talked like men.

Gender ownership theory addresses the nuance of a candidate being perceived as a certain sex and fulfilling the expectations of the same or opposite gender. The choice to craft a message that either owns or disowns the expected gender of a candidate, based upon presented sex, likely depends on the individual constituency the candidate is addressing, including party influences. Certain issues are more relevant to certain constituents, such as immigration and border control for states that border other countries. As parties have owned certain issues or traits, candidates of those parties may feel compelled to mirror those traits

and claim ownership of those issues. For example, since the Democratic Party has positioned itself as the party of social justice and compassion, a Democratic candidate may feel it necessary to appear compassionate in advertisements to appeal to Democratic voters. Perhaps in an ideal world, gender would be irrelevant in the decision theory of both voters and candidates. However, as prior research has found that there are sex-related effects to having women in political positions and on political success, this is not an ideal world. Previous research (Boyd et al., 2010) indicates that having women provides a woman's voice to a situation, like a judicial panel. The addition of a woman's voice can alter policy or judicial outcomes. Additionally, voters may find certain sex-related effects desirable, particularly once a candidate is in office. Therefore, candidates may find an advantage in promoting a perceived gender, according to the strategic desirability to the constituents. Candidates can promote the desired gender perception through having members of that sex in their advertisements, speaking about issues that are associated with that sex, and emphasizing the expected traits of the desired sex. This process can be performed by both female and male candidates. The voting population would then describe the candidate in terms of the gender-expected associations, such as "strong" or "compassionate," often regardless of the presented sex. The voters then vote based upon these perceptions and associations. If the candidate wins, then the candidate has crafted a successful message for his/her constituents. This research seeks to address whether, and how, candidates craft a gendered message, regardless of success.

Previous research (Koch (2000); Huddy and Terkildesen (1993); Kahn (1994); Petrocik (1996); Leeper (1991); Matland (1994); and Sapiro (1982)) has already identified gender associations that voters and candidates utilize during the campaign process. Voters are predisposed to consider candidates as competent on the issue based on whether the candidate is male or female and whether the issue is considered a woman's issue or a man's issue. Additionally, prior research (Koch, 2000) identified that women are perceived as more liberal, regardless of party, whereas men are perceived as being more conservative. Prior research has already determined that voters perceive issues like abortion, healthcare, education, and environmental concerns as women's issues (Koch, 2000). Alternatively, issues like economics, military, national defense, terrorism, and crime are perceived as being men's issues (Koch, 2000). Primarily, these issues are seen as being more competently resolved by individuals of those identified genders. Prior research has also identified certain traits as being perceived as either more masculine or feminine. Women are perceived as being more caring and compassionate. Women are perceived as the caretakers and homemakers, the nurturers of society. Men are perceived as the warriors, the breadwinners, and the leaders of society. Men are perceived as logical and rational (Koch, 2000).

Data and Measures

While political science has often focused on the reception and attribution by voters, this research looked at the crafted messages of the candidates. To this end, candidate-created advertisements were reviewed and codified to determine what the candidates presented of themselves. The Wesleyan Advertising Project and the Wisconsin Ad Project compile candidate advertisements. They also codify said advertisements regarding certain identifiable aspects, including who created the advertisements, but the advertisements are largely uncoded for the research question. Utilizing the Wesleyan Media Project and the Wisconsin Ad Project, which identified the creator of the advertisements, ensured that only those advertisements created by the candidate or with the candidate's direct approval were reviewed for gender ownership.

The Wesleyan Media Project had datasets for the years 2006, 2010, 2012, and 2014. The Wisconsin Ad Project had a dataset for 2008 (but lacked the other years), and it was comparable to the Wesleyan datasets. Thus, to create a complete dataset for a continuous timeframe, both data sources were utilized for the coding process. The initial dataset included 17,916 candidate-created advertisements; of these, 9,860 televised political advertisements for governor, House, and Senate elected positions were randomly selected for each candidate running during this timeframe. As this is an experimental theory and experimental process, the advertisements were coded exclusively by the author. Earlier research in the theory by the author helped to refine the process for this larger dataset. The advertisements were viewed for both traits stated by the candidate regarding him/herself and gender-expectation appeals and associations. The presented sex of the candidate was noted. The presented sex of the candidate was not calculated in gender-expected appeals or associations, nor was the presented sex of the opposition calculated as part of the gender-association.

To the existing dataset, six columns of data were added: Presented Sex of the candidate, Female-Expected Gender Appeals [FA], Male-Expected Gender Appeals [MA], Female-Expected Traits [FT], Male-Expected Traits [MT], and the calculated value Gender Ownership. For Presented Sex, the coding was Male/Female; no numeric value was given. Presented Sex is based upon how the candidate verbally and visually presents him/herself. This also allows the candidate to present his/her preferred gender to the voting population. As only the advertisements were utilized to determine the Presented Sex, unless the candidate stated otherwise, Presented Sex was based upon the visual appearance and pronouns utilized by and for the candidate. For FA, MA, FT, and MT, the values had the lower bound of 0 but no upper bound. The calculated value of Gender Ownership was a scaled value wherein negative calculated values reflected a candidate that distanced him/herself from the expected gender and positive calculated values reflected a candidate that connected him/herself with the expected gender, based upon presented sex in his/her advertisement.

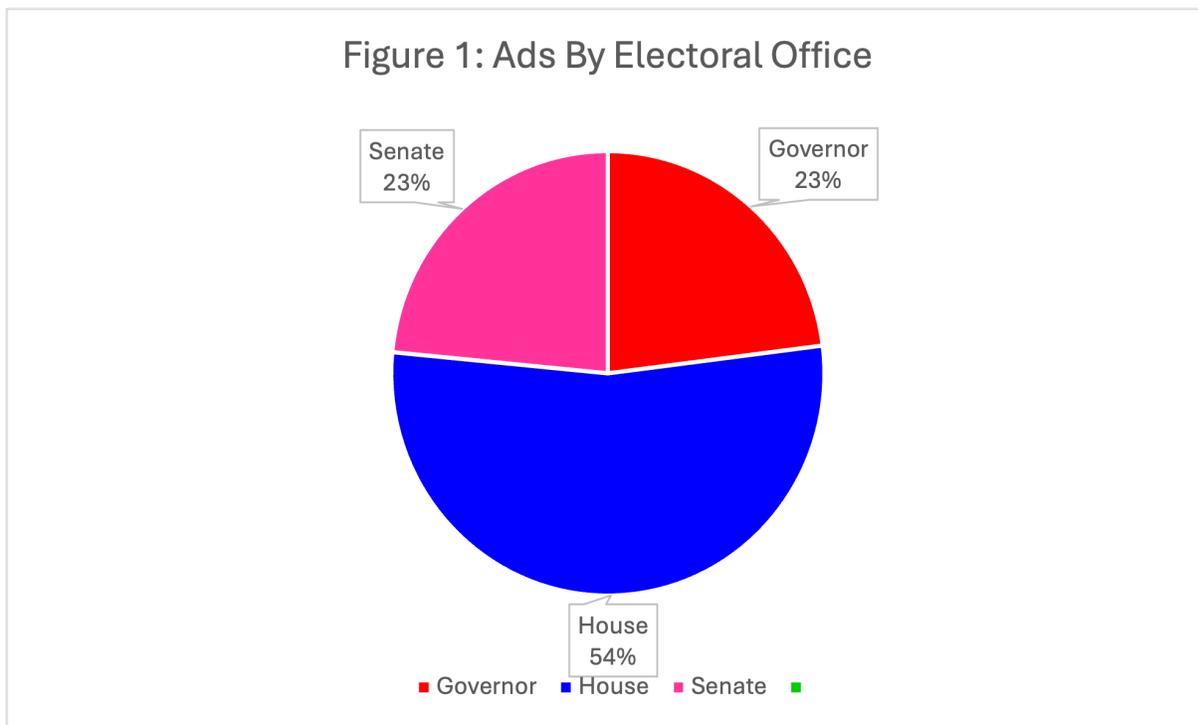


Figure 1. Ads by Electoral Office

For example, Senator Susan Collins in her 2014 advertisement “Always There” has a score of -8. During the course of her advertisement, Susan Collins is repeatedly seen with men, but she is the only woman in the advertisement. Sen. Collins shows men working, but never shows a woman or child. While she emphasizes the hard work of Maine residents, she fails to recognize women in the process. This creates a distance between herself and women in the electorate while connecting with men in the electorate. For this value, there is neither a lower bound nor an upper bound, as it reflects the unique desires of the candidate to either create greater perceived proximity with their own gender or create greater perceived distance from their own gender. The formula for the calculated variable was adjusted to reflect the perceived sex of the candidate; thus, female candidates had one formula and male candidates had a similar but male-focused formula. The two formulas allowed for a direct connection to be made between the calculated variable and the level of gender ownership of the candidate. A calculated value of zero indicated a gender-neutral candidate in the advertisement. A value of zero could be attained in two possible ways: either the candidate made no appeals regarding themselves, or the candidate had an equally balanced number of appeals over the course of the advertisement. Candidates with negative scores further from zero were distancing themselves to a greater degree from their expected gender in the advertisement; whereas, candidates with advertisements with a higher positive number are associating themselves to a greater degree with their expected gender.

Utilizing the previously identified issue areas, comparable issues included in the datasets from Wisconsin and Wesleyan were sorted as either male or female in their gender appeal. For the traits’ values, visual and auditory elements that appealed to the perceived expected traits like statements of caring, mother, and helping were identified as female appealing. For male traits, elements that appealed to the associated male traits like military service or militaria, fighter, and leading were sorted for male. Visual elements likewise were selected because of their association with the traits and issues that are gender-connected. Additionally, the genders of the individuals included could either associate or disassociate the candidate with his/her own gender. By including the same gender in the advertisement, the candidate is reaffirming the message that the candidate understands others of the same gender because he/she is of that gender. By including members of the other gender, the candidate is presenting the message that he/she crosses his/her own gender and understands the other gender. The totality of the message conveys a willingness or unwillingness to be associated with the assumptions connected with the candidate’s gender, or gender ownership.

The final formulas utilized were: $GOf = [1 + ((FA * 2) - MA) + ((FT * 2) - MT) + ((Iw * 2) - Im)]$ $GOm = [0 + ((MA * 2) - FA) + ((MT * 2) - FT) + ((Im * 2) - Iw)]$ These variables represent the subsequent values: GOf = Gender Ownership-Female GOm = Gender Ownership-Male FA = Female-Expected Gender Appeals MA = Male-Expected Gender Appeals FT = Female-Expected Traits MT = Male-Expected Traits Iw = Women’s Issues Im = Men’s Issues

Of the 9,860 sampled advertisements, 2,268 advertisements were for the position of governor, and 7,592 were for federal positions (5,277 House advertisements, 2,315 Senate advertisements). From the entire sample set, 1,796 advertisements were for female candidates, constituting less than 20% of the sample set, while the remaining 8,064 advertisements were for male candidates. At the gubernatorial level, 322 advertisements out of 2,268 were for female candidates. At the federal level, 1,474 out of 7,592 advertisements were for female candidates. Of the total 9,860 advertisements, 4,481 were for Democratic candidates, while 5,101 were for Republican candidates, and 278 were for Minor Party candidates. All candidates that were neither Democrat nor Republican were combined for the Minor Party analysis. While the minor parties that were combined to create the Minor Party set do not necessarily share talking points, individually, the population for these minor parties was too small for analysis. By combining, there was the potential for analysis, or at least determining whether the sample set was still too small for proper analysis. Additionally, by removing the minor parties into a single set, the Minor Party candidate advertisements would not skew the analysis for the major parties. Each party fielded female candidates for whom advertisements were aired. While 18.2% of all candidate advertisements were for female candidates, Democrats had the highest percentage of advertisements for female candidates compared with the other parties. There were 1,048 advertisements for female Democratic candidates at all levels, comprising approximately 23.4% of all advertisements for Democratic candidates. While Minor Party candidates had the lowest number of advertisements at 278, 40 of which were for female candidates, approximately 14.4% of Minor Party advertisements. Republicans had the highest volume of advertisements at 5,101, 708 of which were for female candidates, approximately 13.9% of all Republican advertisements.

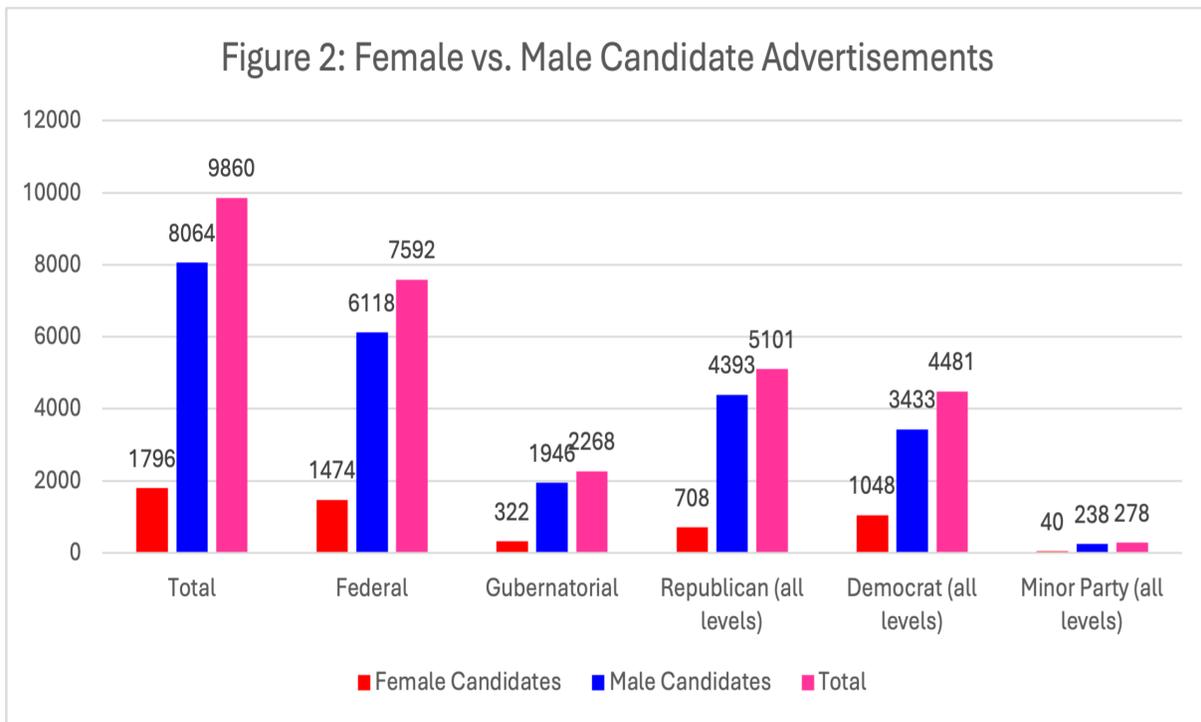


Figure 2. Female vs. Male Candidate Advertisements

Results

Existing political theory supports that female candidates are better supported in the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party has owned women's issues and tends to promote ambitious female candidates. Thus, one would expect that female Democratic candidates would have an easier time presenting female gender-assumptions as positive because doing so aligns with assumptions regarding the Democratic Party. While the results fit existing political science theory, it is important to note that these values are significant for two reasons. One, the values are statistically significant. Second, the value is approximately a half a point increase each election cycle. While this may seem modest, this means that Democratic candidates at all electoral levels are including more gender-assumptions as positive at a rate of one more presentation per two election cycles. In examining the graphs, there is a steeper curve, thus indicating a greater increase, in the 2014 election cycle. This could be indicative that in more recent years, female Democratic candidates are even more willing to present female gender assumptions

Table 1. Gender Ownership for All Female Democratic Candidates

Coefficients:	(Intercept)	-975.79013	Year	0.49132	
Residuals:	Min	1Q	Median	3Q	Max
	-21.763	-4.798	-1.745	4.202	34.220
Coefficients:	Estimate	Std. Error	T value	Pr(> t)	
(Intercept)	-975.79013	176.54714	-5.527	4.11e-08***	
Year	0.49132	0.08782	53594	2.82e-08***	
Residual standard error: 8.108 on 1046 degrees of freedom					
Multiple R-squared: 0.02905, Adjusted R-squared: 0.02812					
F-statistic: 31.3 on 1 and 1046 DF, p-value: 2.825e-08					

in a positive manner and as acceptable for elected office. Additionally, this data further strengthens existing political science research regarding the relationship between the Democratic Party and female candidates.

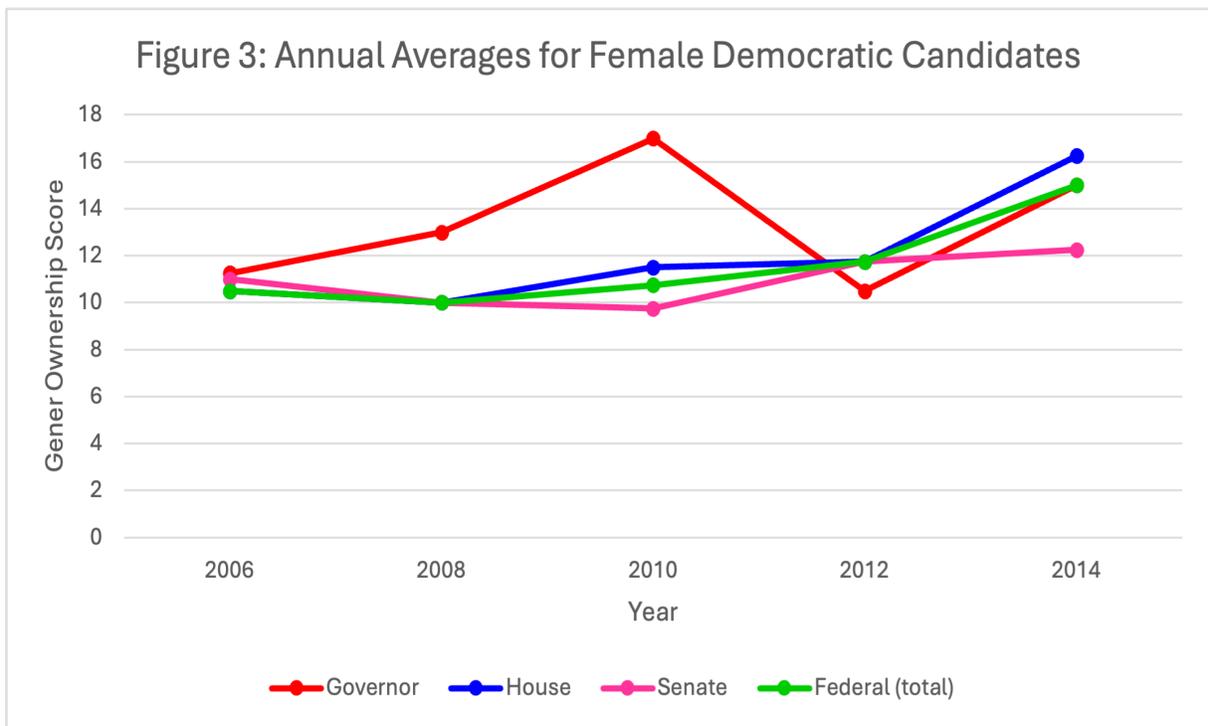


Figure 3. Annual Averages for Female Democratic Candidates

Republican candidates were the only candidates to show any significance in the overall examinations; therefore, one would expect to potentially find some significance. For female Republican candidates, gender ownership over time shows statistical significance. While the level of significance is not the same as for female Democratic candidates, the coefficient still meets the threshold for statistical significance. This indicates that female Republican candidates are increasingly presenting female gender-assumptions as positive elements and even desirable elements for political office. Additionally, female candidates have been doing so at an increasing rate over the timeframe. While one would expect this from Democratic candidates, finding it among Republican candidates is an interesting finding in that it means that female candidates of both major parties are participating in the same behavior.

Based upon these findings, significance appears to occur based upon gender, and also appears based upon party. The next question is whether electoral contest, and contest along with party, has any influence on whether gender ownership is statistically significant.

The number of female House candidates has been increasing in recent years. This is highly beneficial as it increases the overall sample population, wherein one could hope to find significance. While the number of candidates per individual

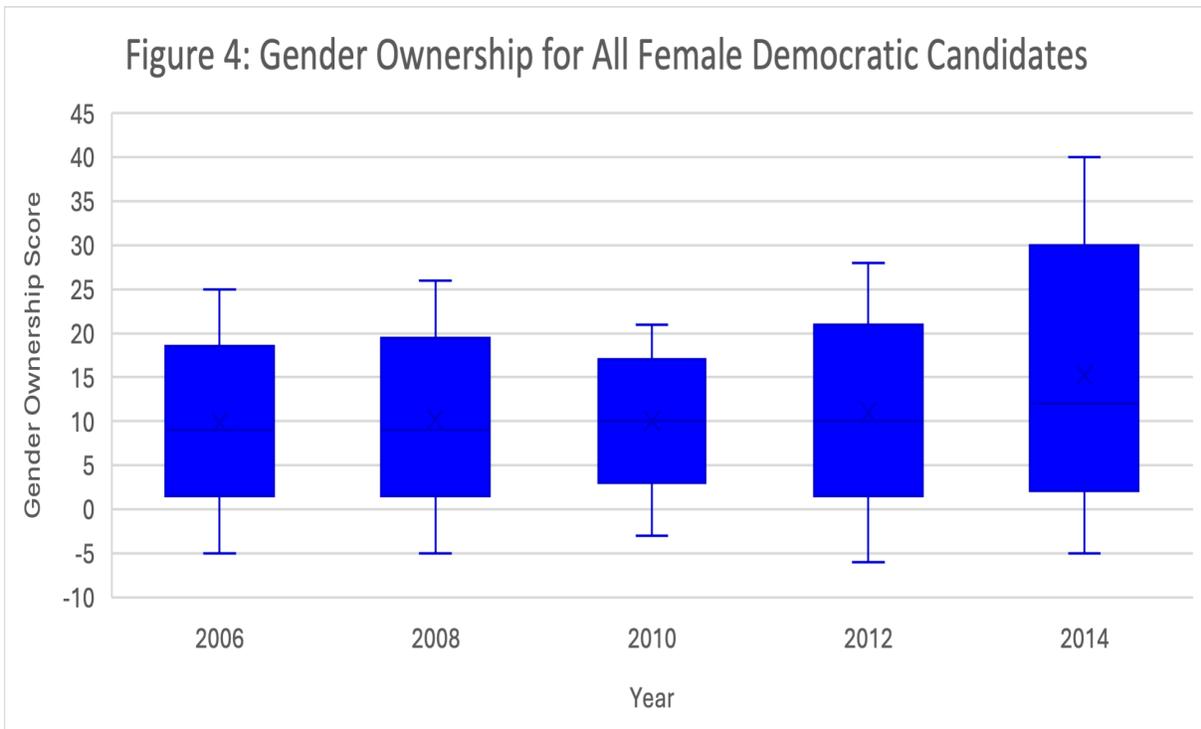


Figure 4. Gender Ownership for All Female Democratic Candidates

Table 2. Gender Ownership for All Female Republican Candidates

Coefficients:	(Intercept)	-478.1312	Year	0.2436	
Residuals:	Min	1Q	Median	3Q	Max
	-21.421	-4.940	-1.959	4.047	41.067
Coefficients:	Estimate	Std. Error	T value	Pr(> t)	
(Intercept)	-478.1312	240.2664	-1.990	0.0470*	
Year	0.2436	0.1195	2.038	0.0419*	
Significance Codes: '***'0.001 '**'0.01 '*'0.05 '.'0.1 ' '1					
Residual standard error: 8.383 on 706 degrees of freedom					
Multiple R-squared: 0.005848, Adjusted R-squared: 0.00444					

party may preclude an adequate discussion due to too small a population for significance, the overall House sample may be large enough to provide the broad strokes of what is occurring. House candidates have the benefit of being able to tailor their messages to specific geographic areas. Candidates are more likely to know their constituents and what messages will be successful with their constituents. This may also mean that if the sample sizes are large enough to warrant significance, then there will likely be greater variation among the parties. The House level is the most probable place for finding a gender ownership effect at statistically significant levels.

The sample for all House candidate advertisements was 5,278 candidate advertisements. Of this sample population, 984 were advertisements for female candidates, approximately 18.6% of all House advertisements. With there being approximately a thousand female House candidate advertisements, the sample size is sufficient to warrant confidence in findings of statistical significance. As the advertisements extended through the entire timeframe, significant findings can be applied more generally and are not limited to a discussion of a single year or election. The model is generally increasing, but the curve appears to be steeper with the 2012 electoral cycle. It is possible that following the 2010 election, female House candidates felt that the female gender assumptions were electorally beneficial. At the overall House level, a positive significant coefficient for gender ownership over time was found. This finding indicates that female candidates for House seats, regardless of party, increasingly own their gender by presenting female gender assumptions as positive over time in their advertisements.

Since significance was found at the overall House level, further investigation by party was warranted to determine whether

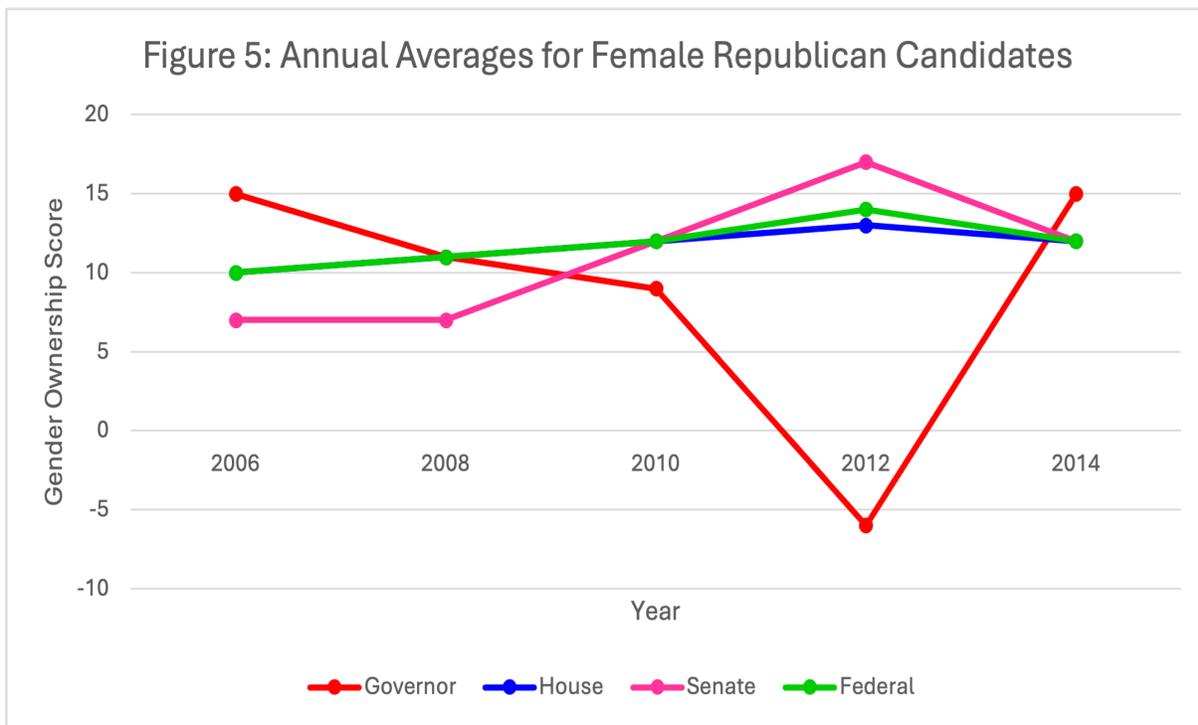


Figure 5. Annual Averages for Female Republican Candidates

party plays a role in whether House candidates own their gender. The Democratic Party has the highest percentage of female advertisements. Additionally, the Democratic Party, theoretically, would be most likely to support female gender assumptions due to party ownership of women’s issues. In the sample set, there were 591 female Democratic House candidate advertisements out of 2,438 total House Democratic advertisements, or approximately 24.2%. This is the highest percentage of female candidates by party and the highest volume of female candidates by party; though both are expected given the likelihood of women to run as Democrats. While the sample size is under a thousand, the level of significance found is indicative that the sample size is probably sufficient. Additionally, the sample is over half of the sample set for all female House candidates. The sample size could be expanded to include the entire population, but the results would likely strengthen the existing results. As the female Democrat candidate advertisements extended through the entire timeframe, there is confidence in the general applicability of the findings. As expected, based upon existing political science research, significance was found for gender ownership over time with a positive coefficient, indicating an increasing of gender ownership over time. Namely, female Democratic House candidates increasingly find electoral benefit in positively presenting female gender assumptions in their campaign advertisements. Additionally, the value for the coefficient is over half a point in each election cycle. This is a significant increase. Furthermore, the graph itself seems to have a steeper curve with the 2012 electoral cycle. This may be

Table 3. Gender Ownership for All Female House Candidates

Coefficients:	(Intercept)	-955.83120	Year	0.48128	
Residuals:	Min	1Q	Median	3Q	Max
	-22.459	-4.572	-1.534	4.391	34.428
Coefficients:	Estimate	Std. Error	T value	Pr(> t)	
(Intercept)	-955.83120	180.76316	-5.288	1.53e-07***	
Year	0.48128	0.08994	5.351	1.09e-07***	
Significance Codes: '***'0.001 '**'0.01 '*'0.05 '.'0.1 ' '1					
Residual standard error: 7.897 on 982 degrees of freedom					
Multiple R-squared: 0.02834, Adjusted R-squared: 0.02735					
F-Statistic: 28.64 on 1 and 982 DF, p-value: 1.087e-07					

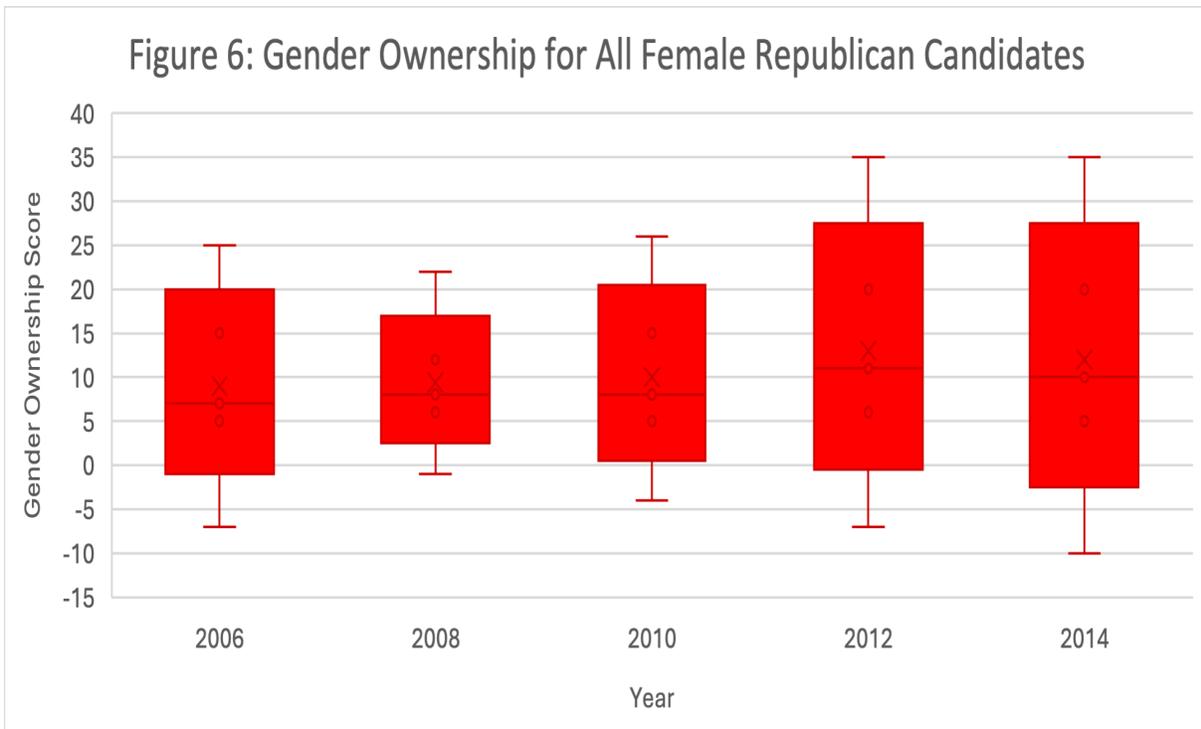


Figure 6. Gender Ownership for All Female Republican Candidates

indicative that gender ownership is potentially increasing at a greater rate in the last two election cycles compared with the first three.

While the Republican Party is not usually associated with women’s issues, and women do not always run as Republicans, the Republican Party is a major party and women do, at times, run as Republicans. Female Republican House candidate advertisements comprised 384 advertisements out of 2,756 House Republican candidate advertisements, approximately 13.9%. The sample set is potentially too small for significance. The volume was lower than anticipated, which increased the risk of being unable to find significance. However, the sample set is closer in volume to the Democratic Party. Therefore, if gender ownership is truly significant to Republican female candidates, then it would likely still show up. As the advertisements extended through the entire timeframe, the results are likely to be generally applicable. No statistical significance was found for gender ownership over time in female Republican House candidate advertisements. The graph is practically straight, which may indicate that female Republican House candidates may have found an electorally effective strategy wherein gender is not a significant or strong factor. Overall, House female candidates displayed strong and significant gender ownership. When the sample set was divided among the parties, significance only appeared for the Democratic party. Thus, it is easy to deduce that the overall significance may be carried by the Democratic Party.

Table 4. Gender Ownership for Female Democratic House Candidates

Coefficients:	(Intercept)	-1327.2361	Year	0.6662	
Residuals:	Min	1Q	Median	3Q	Max
	-21.754	-4.754	-1.419	3.912	34.578
Coefficients:	Estimate	Std. Error	T value	Pr(> t)	
(Intercept)	-1327.2361	240.5864	-5.517	5.18e-08***	
Year	0.6662	0.1197	5.566	3.97e08***	
Significance Codes: '***'0.001 '**'0.01 '*'0.05 '.'0.1 ' '1					
Residual standard error: 8.299 on 589 degrees of freedom					
Multiple R-squared: 0.04996, Adjusted R-squared: 0.04835					
F-statistic: 30.98 on 1 and 589 DF, p-value: 3.971e-08					

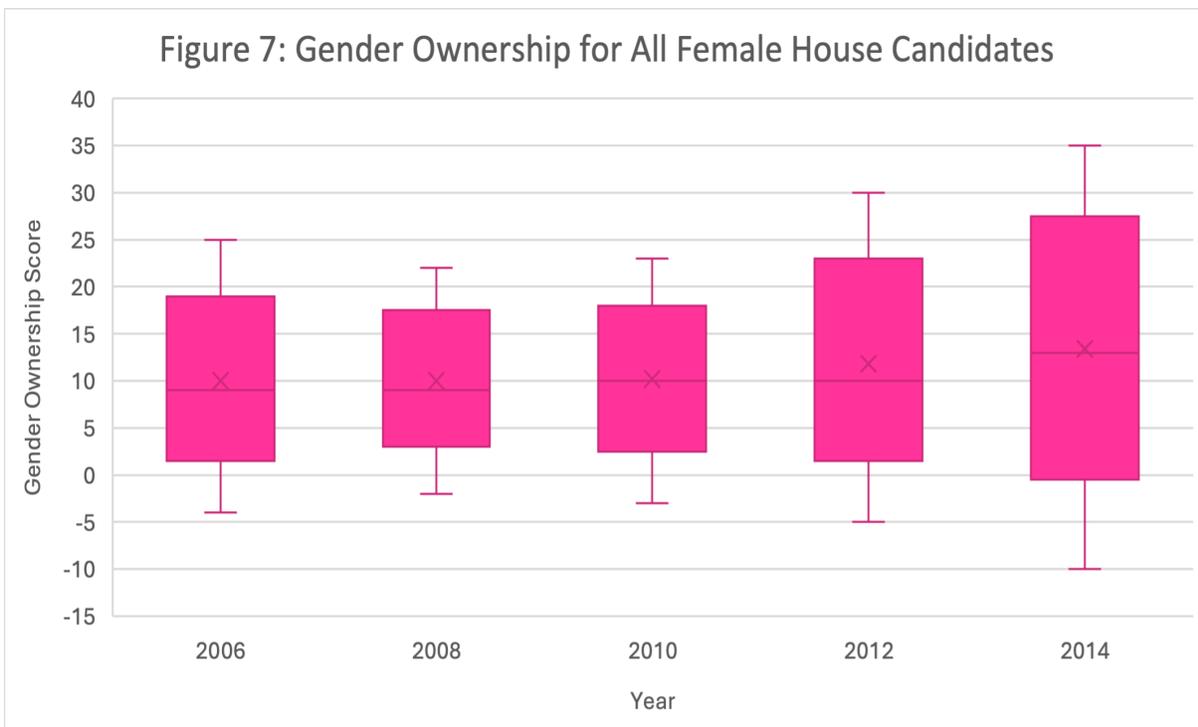


Figure 7. Gender Ownership for All Female House Candidates

While House and Senate are both federal positions that have similar broad concerns with national legislation, House and senatorial candidates are unlikely to campaign in the same manner. Senatorial candidates are more likely to have campaign methods similar to gubernatorial candidates as senatorial candidates will likewise need to reach a broad audience regarding a broad range of topics. senatorial candidates will differ from gubernatorial candidates in that Senators are still legislators rather than executives, as well as needing to address national concerns not just state concerns. So, while one would expect senatorial campaigns to display similarities with both House and gubernatorial candidates, senatorial candidates should display some differences. To gauge the overall impact of gender in senatorial campaigns, regardless of party, the whole sample set of female senatorial candidates was examined.

Female senatorial candidate advertisements constitute 490 advertisements, approximately 21.17%, of all senatorial advertisements. This is both a higher percentage and higher volume of advertisements, compared with gubernatorial candidates. The number of senatorial advertisements is approximately half the number of advertisements for female House candidates. This is not entirely surprising as there are fewer senatorial seats compared with the House, and they do not come up for re-election as frequently as House candidates. Contrary to female gubernatorial candidate advertisements, significance was found for gender ownership over time. Additionally, the finding of significance is more aligned to the findings at the House level. This

Table 5. Gender Ownership for Female Republican House Candidates

Coefficients:	(Intercept)	-284.4489	Year	0.1471	
Residuals:	Min	1Q	Median	3Q	Max
	-20.710	-4.416	-1.710	4.172	30.466
Coefficients:	Estimate	Std. Error	T value	Pr(> t)	
(Intercept)	-284.4489	273.3387	-1.041	0.299	
Year	0.1471	0.1360	1.081	0.280	
Significance Codes: '***'0.001 '**'0.01 '*'0.05 '.'0.1 ' '1					
Residual standard error: 7.224 on 382 degrees of freedom					
Multiple R-squared: 0.003051, Adjusted R-squared: 0.2803					
F-statistic: 1.169 on 1 and 382 DF, p-value: 0.2803					

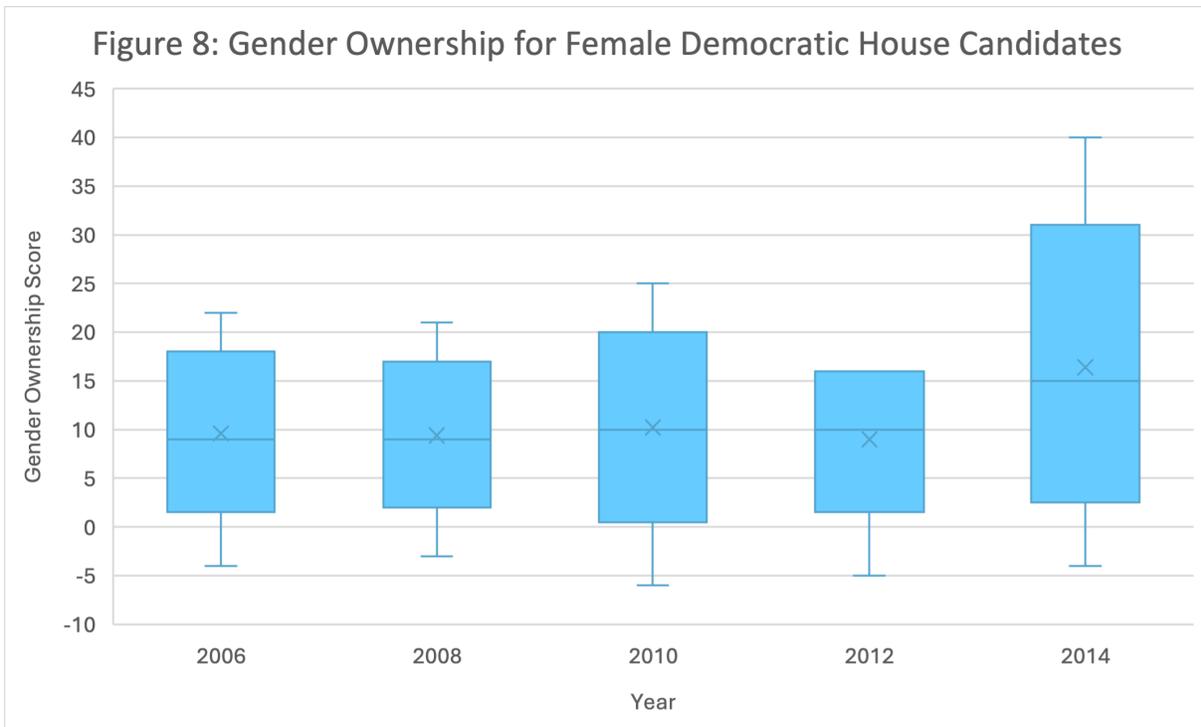


Figure 8. Gender Ownership for Female Democratic House Candidates

may indicate that federal campaigning methods do differ from gubernatorial methods, and gender ownership is a more viable strategy at the federal level compared with the state level. This sample set includes all parties, which is interesting in that, at this point, this indicates that all female candidates, regardless of party, have increasingly presented female gender assumptions as an electoral benefit during the campaign process. As the sample set covers the entire timeframe, the results are more generalizable. Of note, graphically, is that there was a steeper increase between 2010 and 2012. Like previous years, this may indicate a greater willingness to own gender in the last two electoral cycles of the timeframe compared with the first three electoral cycles.

To determine the impact of party, the female senatorial candidate advertisements were separated by party. The total sample set for female senatorial candidate advertisements was only 490 advertisements. In dividing this sample set among the parties, the possibility of finding significance becomes problematic. However, if party and gender are important factors, then significance may still be found. There were 295 Democratic female senatorial candidate advertisements, approximately 28.72% of all senatorial Democratic candidate advertisements. Over half of the female senatorial candidate advertisements were for female Democratic candidates. As Democrats have the highest volume, significance is most likely to occur with this grouping. As is seen, there is a slight significance found with female Democratic senatorial candidates, but the value is not quite at the standard threshold for significance. Though significance is questionable, the coefficient for gender ownership over time

Table 6. Gender Ownership for All Female Senatorial Candidates

Coefficients:	(Intercept)	-853.3374	Year	0.4300	
Residuals:	Min	1Q	Median	3Q	Max
	-20.779	-5.058	-2.058	3.221	41.082
Coefficients:	Estimate	Std. Error	T value	Pr(> t)	
(Intercept)	-853.3374	306.3569	-2.785	0.00555**	
Year	0.4300	0.1523	2.823	0.00495**	
Significance Codes: '***'0.001 '**'0.01 '*'0.05 '.'0.1 ' '1					
Residual standard error: 8.369 on 488 degrees of freedom					
Multiple R-squared: 0.01607, Adjusted R-squared: 0.01405					
F-Statistic: 7.969 on 1 and 488 DF, p-value: 0.004953					

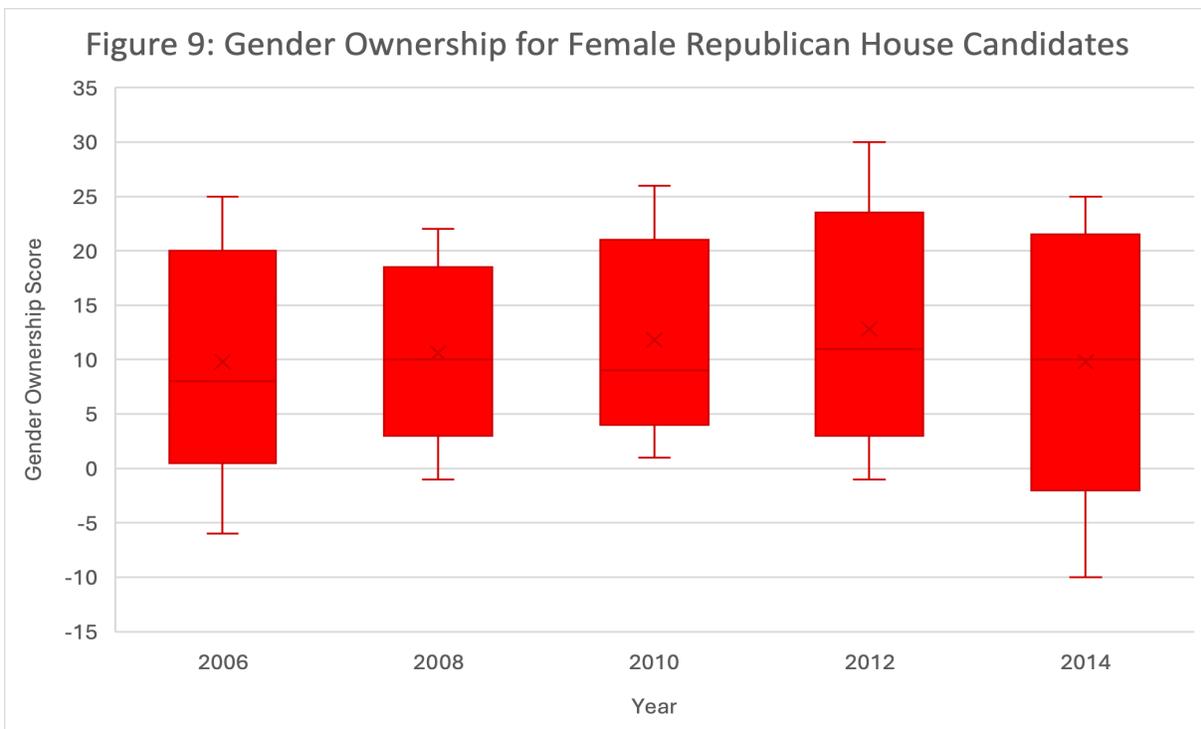


Figure 9. Gender Ownership for Female Republican House Candidates

is positive, indicative that female senatorial candidates are increasingly presenting female gender-assumptions as electorally beneficial in their political advertisements. While the graph indicates a decreasing value to 2010, after 2010, the graph seems to be steadily increasing. As the advertisements extended through the entire timeframe, the results are more generalizable, as the increase may continue due to the change in direction with the 2010 electoral cycle.

For female Republican Senate candidate advertisements, there were 187 advertisements, approximately 15.5% of all Republican senatorial candidate advertisements. The percentage and volume of advertisements for female candidates are lower than for Democratic senatorial candidate advertisements and lower than anticipated. Though the sample was small and potentially problematic, significance was still tested. The advertisements extend through the entire timeframe, increasing the generalizability of the findings. Remarkably, even with the small sample set, significance was found. While expanding the sample set may provide greater strength to the significance, the finding of significance for the Republican Party candidates is interesting. Additionally, the significant variable, gender ownership over time, is positive and larger than the coefficient found for the Democratic Party candidates. This is indicative that female Republican senatorial candidates are increasingly, at a rate greater than the Democratic Party candidates, presenting female gender-assumptions as politically positive in their campaign advertisements over time. This is unexpected in that the Republican Party is not known for being associated with women’s

Table 7. Gender Ownership for Female Democratic Senatorial Candidates

Coefficients:	(Intercept)	-617.0080	Year	0.3124	
Residuals:	Min	1Q	Median	3Q	Max
	-18.447	-4.823	-2.072	3.553	26.553
Coefficients:	Estimate	Std. Error	T value	Pr(> t)	
(Intercept)	-617.0080	332.6164	-1.855	0.0646	
Year	0.3124	0.1654	1.888	0.0600	
Significance Codes: ‘***’0.001 ‘**’0.01 ‘*’0.05 ‘.’0.1 ‘ ’1					
Residual standard error: 7.653 on 293 degrees of freedom					
Multiple R-squared: 0.01202, Adjusted R-squared: 0.008653					
F-statistic: 3.566 on 1 and 293 DF, p-value: 0.05996					

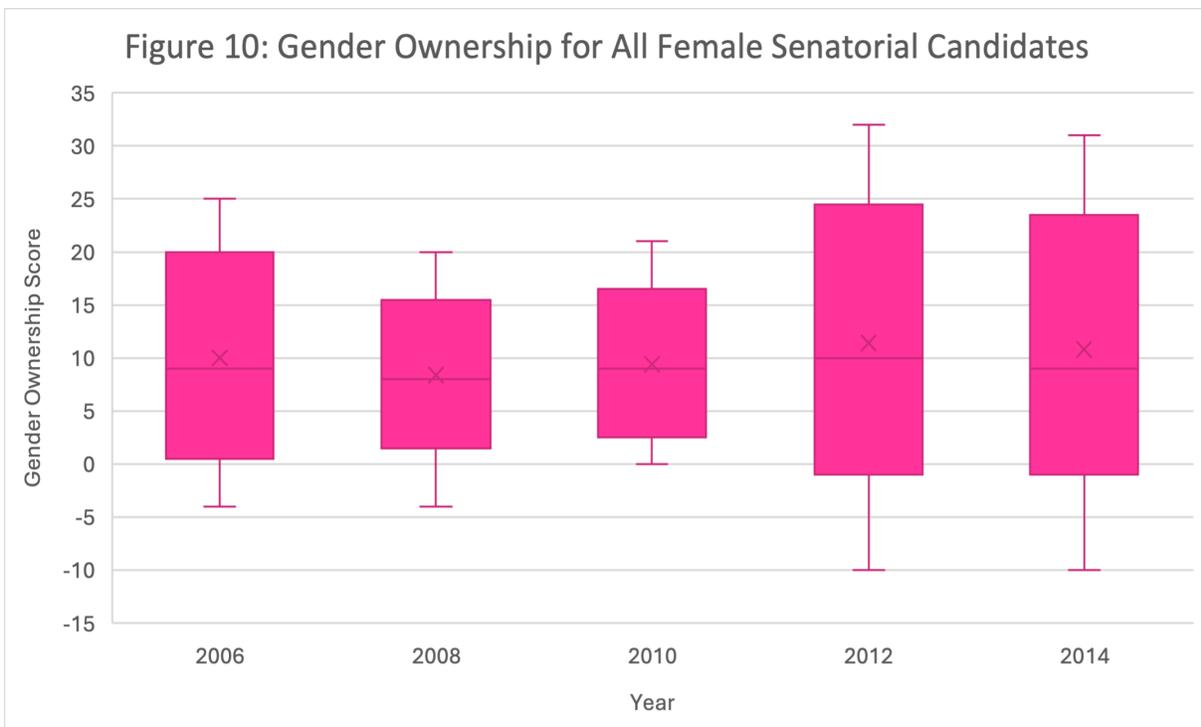


Figure 10. Gender Ownership for All Female Senatorial Candidates

issues, or female-assumed gender traits, or female candidates. Graphically, it is interesting to note that the curve peaked in 2012 and appears to be decreasing for the 2014 electoral cycle. Additional years would help to understand the state of the trend after 2014. Additionally, finding significance at the senatorial level is unexpected, as no significance had been found at the gubernatorial or the House electoral levels. Significance had been found overall for Republican female candidates, regardless of electoral race, but at the individual race level had not been found until the senatorial level. Apparently, the significance of gender ownership over time is concentrated at this level. At the senatorial level, significance was found for both of the major parties, with the coefficient for gender ownership over time being positive. Therefore, based upon this information, female candidates from both parties are embracing their gender by presenting gender-assumptions as politically beneficial.

Discussion

The Democratic and Republican parties have fostered expectations in the electorate regarding how their candidates will own issues and traits. Based upon these expectations, one might expect to see similar ownership regarding gender, as gender has perceived connections with traits and issues. As the Democratic Party often connects itself with women and the concerns

Table 8. Gender Ownership for Female Republican Senatorial Candidates

Coefficients:	(Intercept)	-1378.5050	Year	647.7490	
Residuals:	Min	1Q	Median	3Q	Max
	-22.096	-5.830	-2.565	3.287	40.287
Coefficients:	Estimate	Std. Error	T value	Pr(> t)	
(Intercept)	-1378.5050	647.7490	-2.128	0.0346*	
Year	0.6915	0.3221	2.147	0.0331*	
Significance Codes: '***'0.001 '**'0.01 '*'0.05 '.'0.1 ' '1					
Residual standard error: 9.468 on 185 degrees of freedom					
Multiple R-squared: 0.02431, Adjusted R-squared: 0.01903					
F-statistic: 4.609 on 1 and 185 DF, p-value: 0.03311					

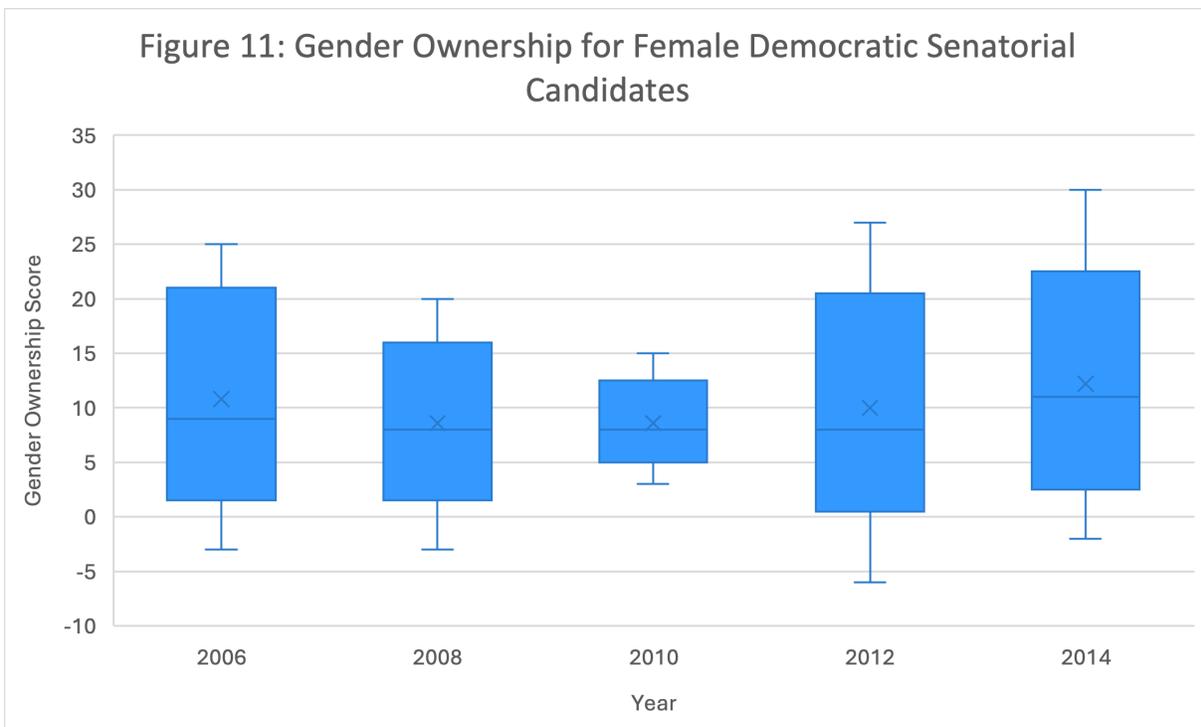


Figure 11. Gender Ownership for Female Democratic Senatorial Candidates

of women, one could expect a Democratic candidate to attempt to communicate female gender ownership, particularly if a candidate were female. By the same token, as the Republican Party has connected itself with traits and issues that are typically perceived as more masculine, there is an expectation that a female candidate would distance herself from her own gender perceptions and connect herself with more masculine perceptions. The findings are not that simplistic. Party is not the only variable. On the surface, women of both parties are communicating a connection with the perception of the female gender. While this connection was expected of Democratic candidates, this was an unexpected finding for Republican candidates.

While the research could have stopped there, the follow-up question of which electoral levels see gender ownership revealed a more nuanced picture. Female Democratic candidates have a higher gender ownership score when they are running for House seats. Female Democratic candidates running for Senate seats do not show significance in their gender ownership. This indicates that at the Senate level, gender ownership is not a significant variable in female Democratic campaign communication. This may be the result of the size and composition of the electorate in that the Senate seat draws on a larger and more diverse electorate and, for Democratic female candidates, there may be less electoral incentive to emphasize female gender ownership.

Again, research could have stopped with a satisfying conclusion that female candidates of both parties are owning their gender in their campaign messaging. But, as nuance was seen with the Democratic Party, nuance was explored in the Republican Party. An interesting finding is that the gender ownership variable is significant in the opposite races from the Democratic Party. Namely, Republican female candidates own the female gender assumptions in Senate races, but gender ownership is not significant in House races. Whereas the Democratic candidates may not see an electoral advantage in owning their gender in the larger, more diverse Senate race, Republican candidates may see owning their gender as an electoral advantage to connect with a broader electorate and perhaps connect with voters who typically vote Democratic.

The findings of this research are encouraging as the results indicate that candidates do connect themselves with gender assumptions in their campaign messages. However, this research is experimental and requires duplication for verification. Additionally, the research does not communicate directly with candidates to determine the candidates' decision-making process in the inclusion of elements in their campaign advertisements. Indeed, many of the decisions may have been subconscious decisions that candidates were unaware of owning gender perceptions. Finally, while the overall dataset was large, many of the individual candidate, electoral office, party, and sex datasets were smaller. While many individual datasets were pooled to get analyzable datasets, again, nuance can be lost, and gender ownership exists in the nuance.

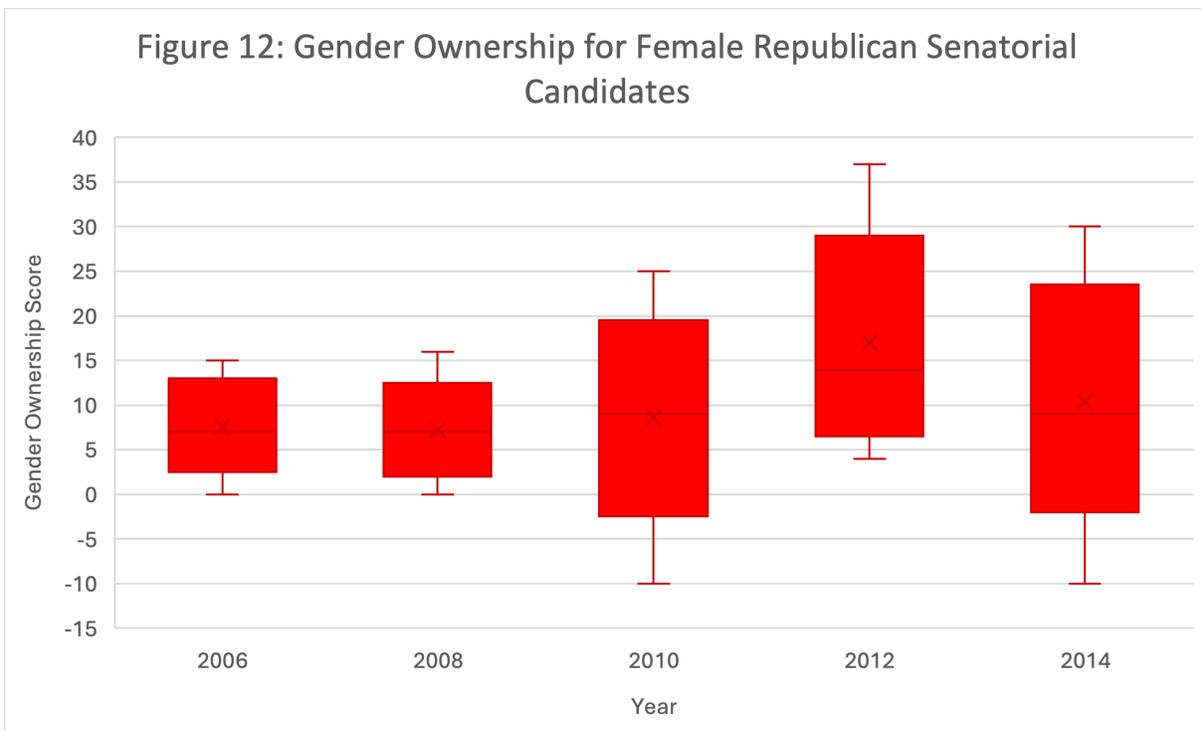


Figure 12. Gender Ownership for Female Republican Senatorial Candidates

Conclusions

In conclusion, we are seeing shifts in how women run for political office. In the past, female candidates have chosen to be seen in more masculine ways to be seen as equals. This research indicates that candidates are seeing a reason to own their gender. Female candidates may be seeing an electoral advantage in owning their gender identity. While this trend may have been occurring for some time with Democratic candidates, seeing this shift in Republican candidates is perhaps more telling in the political climate.

In political science, there is some debate as to how important and how effective campaigns are. Yet, candidates and parties spend large amounts of time and money crafting campaign messages to be heard by the voting public in hopes of mobilizing voters and convincing them to vote for a specific politician. Voters seek to understand and connect with office seekers through political campaigns. The content of those campaign advertisements is frequently a matter of interest to political scientists and politicians, as all seek to understand what works in campaigns and what does not. Heretofore, political science has focused on various aspects, including issue ownership, incumbency, party affiliation, and celebrity. While gender has been examined, it has largely been examined in the binary variable of sex. An aspect that is under-studied, due to the small pool of candidates, is the effect gender has on candidate messaging, particularly whether a candidate embraces their gender or distances themselves from their perceived gender. In a society that increasingly sees gender as fluid, understanding the role of gender in candidate messaging can help political scientists understand the changes in campaigns. This research examines a little more broadly the concept of whether candidates own that binary sex model. Society has increasingly embraced a spectrum-based concept of gender, but political science has largely relied on a binary model of sex for analysis. This method and variable hope to address the degree to which any candidate defines themselves and owns their perceived sex. Gender ownership can fill the gap in how political science addresses gender in the literature and future research. Additionally, when combined with future research, politicians and political scientists can identify what works in campaigns.

Political science has examined different aspects of candidate messaging in hopes of understanding how candidates present themselves, and, potentially, what gets candidates elected. Based upon this initial study, candidates feel it is important to address gender in their campaign messaging. While this data shows that there is some ownership happening, there are many avenues to explore the relationships between gender ownership and the political climate. Future research should examine male candidates in both parties to identify whether gender ownership is seen as advantageous for male candidates. Research should examine whether the messaging affects electoral success, and how. Additionally, with the apparent changes in tactics since the Trump candidacy, it may be beneficial to see if candidates have changed their messaging in response. Such research could

prove useful in understanding campaign messaging.

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Is It Better To Debate A Question Without Settling It Or Settle A Question Without Debating It?

Hypotheses About Televised U.S. Presidential Debates

John A. Tures¹

¹Department of Political Science, LaGrange College, jtures@lagrange.edu

ABSTRACT

A quote attributed to British writer William Godwin argues, “It is better to debate a question without settling it than settle a question without debating it.” Every four years since 1976, America has hosted televised presidential debates as well as debates among journalists, pundits, and scholars on whether these contests are productive endeavors. Instead of talking past one another or seeking to settle a generalized question, we should be asking how, when, and why these on-camera verbal battles might influence the voters, the campaigns, and the presidential election. In this article, I look at a series of hypotheses about these presidential debates. First, I examine whether there are enough uncommitted voters who could be swayed by a presidential debate. Second, I look at how many Americans are even watching these debates, and whether interest is declining or increasing. Third, I consider whether most viewers think these debates are informative. Fourth, I look at whether the polls change after the debates, and if the race dynamics involve a lead change, a narrowing of the contest, or if one candidate can pull away from their rival. Fifth, I evaluate the relationship between the presidential debate winners and what happens on Election Day.

Introduction

The 1960 election may have been the first televised presidential debate, but it was not the first time candidates faced off in American history.¹ “Debates have been part of the US political scene since James Madison and James Monroe debated for a seat in Congress.² and Abraham Lincoln served as a surrogate debater for the Whig party in the days when presidential candidates did not publicly campaign,” write Carlin and McKinney (2020). And there’s that famous series of debates between Abraham Lincoln and Steven Douglas over an Illinois Senate seat in 1858.

With the advent of radio, there was the potential for a mass broadcast of candidate debates. But Congress mandated that minor parties that qualified to be on the ballot should be included in debates as well in Section 315 of the Communications Act of 1934 (Bomboy 2024), making the prospect unappealing to front-runners.

“In 1948, Republican primary candidates Thomas Dewey and Harold Stassen took part in a radio debate during the Oregon primary. The Dewey-Stassen contest was limited to one question: Should the Communist Party be outlawed in the United States? In 1956, Democratic contenders Adlai Stevenson and Estes Kefauver debated on live television during the Florida primary. And during the general election, two proxies for Stevenson and President Dwight Eisenhower took part in a live edition of the television show “Face the Nation.” Eleanor Roosevelt advocated for Stevenson as president and Sen. Margaret Chase Smith argued the case of the Eisenhower campaign (Bomboy 2024).” Subsequent contests were made possible with the suspension of Section 315 by Congress.

The 1960 election and the role of the debates between Vice-President Richard Nixon and Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy have been listed as a “game changer” in American politics, ushering in a new era of televised presidential contests.³

¹An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the 2024 Georgia Political Science Association (GPSA) at St. Simon’s Island, Georgia. The author would like to thank the chair and panelists, Larry Johnson from the Cobb County Courier for publishing my data on debate winners, as well as Jenna Pittman, Katie Gonzalez, and Sosuke Niki, LaGrange College Undergraduates. The quote in the abstract is also attributed to French essayist Joseph Joubert (Brainy Quotes, n.d.). Both wrote from the late 1700s to the early 1800s.

²The debates for the congressional seat in Virginia took place during the ratification debate of the U.S. Constitution in 1789. Madison narrowly won the election, but the two became friends during the spirited contest (Constitution Center 2024)

³No debates were held for the next three election cycles: 1964, 1968 or 1972. Many perceive that in two of the cases (1964, 1972) one side had such a wide lead in the polls that engaging would only serve to tighten the race. And in 1968, the chaos of having a late presidential entrant (Vice-President Hubert H. Humphrey on the Democratic Party ticket), and a viable third-party candidate (George Wallace) may have forestalled a similar debate, though the election results were much closer.

In 1976, President Gerald Ford and Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter agreed to a presidential debate, and Congress suspended Section 315. There was even a first-time contest between vice-presidential candidates Senators Bob Dole of Kansas and Walter Mondale of Minnesota. There were two presidential debates in 1980: one between President Carter and California Governor Ronald Reagan, as well as a separate battle between Reagan and Illinois Congressman John Anderson, when Carter refused to share the stage with Anderson, the third-party candidate. Since 1984, however, there have been presidential and vice-presidential debates each election cycle, even with the Great Recession and COVID-19 pandemic.

There is a debate among journalists, pundits, and scholars about just how much these debates influence elections. Some conclude that there are too few undecided voters to make a difference. Critics claim fewer people are watching than ever before, and those who do tune in find these TV debates to be useless. Cynics contend that the minds of voters aren't changed by the outcome. These skeptics feel the relationship between debate winners and the Ballot Box results is negligible.

For others, these presidential debates on the television screen do matter. They believe there are enough undecided voters in play before the first night of the debates and that the ratings for such events are increasing, not decreasing. They feel that voters find utility in these presidential battles broadcast into the living rooms of Americans. Debate supporters are optimistic that such debates can be "game changers" when it comes to moving the surveys of presidential choices, and on Election Day.

These arguments will be evaluated through an evaluation of the sources, and via data from polls and election returns, examining contests from 1960 to 1976 through 2024. To test the arguments of whether debates matter, I look at several hypotheses: the number of undecided voters and the poll gaps, ratings for televised presidential debates, and surveys of viewers to see whether many find these contests useful. I also look at poll fluctuations before and after the debates, as well as the relationship between debate success and election success.

Debate Theory and Hypotheses

In this paper, my theory examines whether the presidential debates can affect the voters' choice. From this, an examination of five hypotheses can be derived, each related to the impact of the debate and how it might affect the electorate. They are as follows.

Hypothesis 1: Undecideds

1. Pessimistic Argument: There are not enough undecided voters to impact the results of the election.
2. Optimistic Argument: There are enough undecided voters to impact the results of the election.

Hypothesis 2: Watchers

1. Pessimistic Argument: Viewership of the televised debates is declining, making debates less relevant for the election.
2. Optimistic Argument: Viewership of the televised debates is increasing, making debates more relevant for the election.

Hypothesis 3: Utility

1. Pessimistic Argument: Most debate watchers find televised debates to be unhelpful.
2. Optimistic Argument: Most debate watchers find televised debates to be helpful.

Hypothesis 4: Poll Impact

1. Pessimistic Argument: Few presidential debates change presidential contest polls.
2. Optimistic Argument: Many presidential debates change presidential contest polls.

Hypothesis 5: Election Impact

1. Pessimistic Argument: Few presidential debate performances impact the elections.
2. Optimistic Argument: Many presidential debate performances impact the elections.

For each hypothesis, I will review the relevant literature and use data to test arguments related to the televised presidential debates, to evaluate whether there is more support for the pessimistic argument about debates or the more optimistic side on debates.

The Undecided Hypothesis

In this hypothesis, I evaluate the argument of whether there are enough voters who have not yet made up their minds by the time of the first debate who could potentially influence the outcome of an election.

Pessimism About Undecided Voters Before Debates

A strong critique of debates is that in today's polarized political environment, so many voters have made up their minds long before the debates begin, reducing the ability of these televised contests to make a difference.

Rutgers Political Scientist Ross K. Baker (2004, 21) states that we should expect little impact from debates because so many voters have already made up their minds, with loyalty akin to fans of athletic contests. "The attitude of people toward presidential debates is akin to the feelings they take with them to sporting events. You cheer for the home team. And if the locals are getting the stuffing beat out of them, you don't shift allegiances."

Schaffner and Soler (2024) of Tufts University contend that "undecided voters can be challenging to study since they typically make up such a small share of the electorate. In 2016, voters who were still undecided in October made up about 8% of voters. But in 2020, that figure dropped to just 4%." The authors add this about undecided voters: "Their influence on the final outcome is often modest at best." They also imply that undecided members of the electorate may not vote (Schaffner and Soler 2024).

Bremmer (2025) argues that it's not just that most voters are loyalists of different parties. He claims the gap between the two sides is further apart than ever. "The information environment is particularly troubling. Americans don't listen to the same news or read the same headlines, don't agree on the basic terms of debate, and increasingly don't engage with each other at all. A deeply polarized and increasingly nonfunctional information ecosystem delivers diametrically opposed visions of the country and the world to partisan voters, entirely incurious about what is and isn't true. The difference between the worldviews of the two roughly equivalent political sides in the United States has only grown as a consequence, making disagreement between Democrats and Republicans greater than the country has seen before."

Brenan (2025) confirms this historic partisanship with Gallup survey data. "In 2024, the shares of Republicans identifying as conservative and Democrats identifying as liberal both reached record highs. As partisans have become increasingly polarized ideologically, so too have the candidates elected to public office representing those parties. That leaves less room for across-the-aisle negotiation on key issues between the two parties in federal and state government. It also has led to intra-party disagreement between ideologically extreme and centrist officeholders of the same party, which has sometimes made it challenging for the controlling parties of institutions to pass legislation their parties favor or handle basic government functions."

Evidence from the Pew Research Center (2024) shows that many in the electorate have made up their mind on who to vote for before the debates even begin. Figure 1 shows that many voters decided on their candidates before the conventions, with some making their choice even before the year began.⁴

Zara (2020) adds that points "[p]olling data suggest that most voters have, in fact, made up their minds by now—just 3% were undecided in a recent Quinnipiac poll," he writes.

Additional data from the Pew Research Center (2024) on more recent cases supports the argument that many voters made up their minds for whom they would support long before the debates occurred. In 2016, nearly two-thirds of the voters selected their candidate even before September. That early decision-making trend jumped to 84 percent during the 2020 election and 81 percent before September in the 2024 election (Pew Research Center 2024), as seen in Figure 2.

For the most part, people tune into the debates already having made their choice and cheer on their preferred candidate almost the way they would their favorite sports team, University of Michigan Director of Debate Aaron Kall adds (Ali 2024).

Optimism About Undecided Voters Before Debates

While many voters may have decided early in the campaign whether to vote Republican or Democratic, there may be enough voters sitting on the fence to matter, especially when many contemporary contests are neck-and-neck in the polls.

Hillygus and Jackman's (2003) assessment of the 2000 election and debates found that the biggest movers (in terms of changing who they would support) are independents, undecided voters, as well as mismatched partisans, people with views of one party who vote for the opposite party.

Kall also told NewsNation prior to the first debate between Trump and Biden that even a small number of undecided voters watching the debate would matter. "Even if it doesn't move the needle very much, debates have the ability to potentially shift enough undecided voters to have a big impact, and if not the debate itself, the debate then drives future media cycles, fundraising and other things that has the cumulative big effect on some low-information or undecided voters," he said (Ali 2024).

⁴It is worth noting that cases with many voters who make up their minds earlier are correlated with the presence of an incumbent on the ticket.

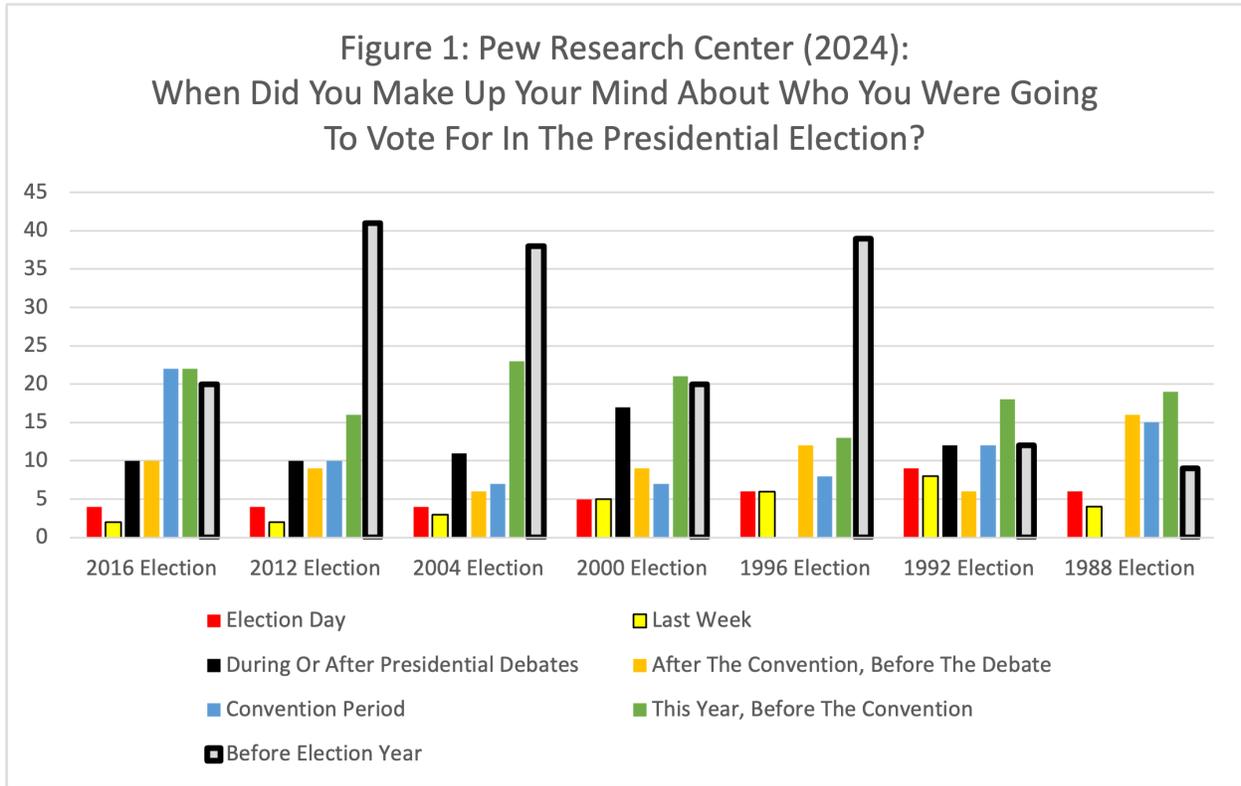


Figure 1. Pew Research

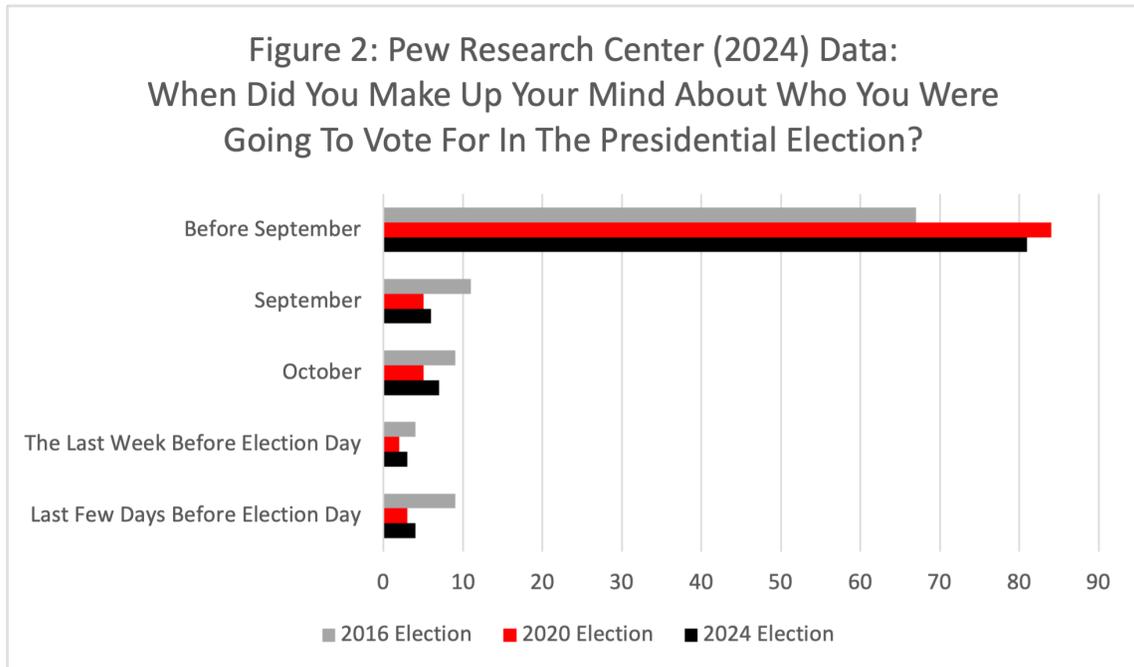


Figure 2. Pew Research

Even critics of presidential debates admit that it would not take many undecided voters in a close election to have an impact. Debates are “‘unlikely to change a lot of minds,’ [University of South Maine] Political Science Professor Ron Schmidt said. ‘And that there are probably not many undecided voters there. But right now, this election looks so close that it doesn’t take many votes for any action to become consequential. So it could wind up mattering in this context.’ Schmidt went on to say while debates rarely change voters’ minds, they can have an impact on morale and have some effect on voter turnout (Ellis 2024).”

Falcon (2024) quotes University of Missouri Professor Ben Warner, “[who] has studied presidential debates for the past 15 years. He said they make a difference, especially for undecided voters, and can rally supporters to the polls. ‘Most people have made up their minds about both candidates, but it’s so close that the undecided voters will almost certainly determine who wins the election,’ Warner said.”

Mehra (2024) questions whether the term “undecided voter” is even applicable, claiming there’s a little bit of indecision in every voter. “Researchers at Harvard’s Institute for Quantitative Social Science (IQSS) have begun peeling back the layers of this long-held belief. The result is a startling conclusion: the firm line we’ve drawn between the “decided” and the “undecided” may not exist. In truth, every one of us is swaying, imperceptibly but undeniably, in response to the national mood, the political climate, and the stories that dominate the media. And here’s the thing—those voters in the middle, the ones we call “undecided,” are simply those most visibly affected by this swing.” Enos (2017) also challenges the notion that voters are lifelong Republicans or Democrats, showing how voters are movable in small, subtle ways.

Evidence on Undecided Voters Before Debates

Figures 1 and 2 reveal that the majority of voters pick their candidate early in the election cycle. But the number of voters remaining who have not picked their presidential candidate is enough to swing the election. Only one election in our sample (1984) was decided by a double-digit margin. More than half of the elections in our study were decided by less than five percentage points in the popular vote.

In this section, I compare the number of voters who did not make up their minds until the debate (using Pew Research Center 2024 data) to the poll margin just before the debate moderator’s first question. I look at data from the Gallup Poll from 1960 through 2008. Saad (2008) provides data from 1960 through 2004, using Gallup polling numbers, while Gallup (2008) adds the 2008 election.

Data for the 2012-2024 cases comes from RealClearPolitics (2012, 2016, 2020, 2024a, and 2024b) averages. For these cases, I utilized the average of the five closest non-partisan polls from before the date of the first debate, not overlapping the first debate date. I then compared the average of the five closest non-partisan polls from after the date of the last debate, not overlapping the last debate date.

Figure 3 shows that only one election between 1988 and 2024 had a pre-debate poll average with a size that was larger than the number of declared undecided voters. That election was in 1996. In the other eight elections in this sample, there were more undecided voters than the pre-debate poll average of voters, with five of these having a gap of undecideds to pre-debate poll average of more than ten percentage points, including 1992, 2000, 2012, 2016, and 2024.

The Watcher Hypothesis

In this hypothesis, I evaluate whether voters are increasingly skipping the debate coverage, or if they are increasingly tuning in to see these televised presidential debates.

Pessimism About Debate Watchers

There’s a growing belief that when it comes to viewing televised debates, they just aren’t what they used to be. Cynics feel that few debates measure up to the number of watchers from the early contests, like 1960, or even Ronald Reagan’s debate with Jimmy Carter in 1980.

As Williams (2015) found, debate ratings were much higher in 1960, but those may have been artificially inflated. “In the 1960s, when the Big Three TV networks had viewership on lockdown and household Internet access was four decades away, debates were ‘roadblocks’: broadcast simultaneously across all three channels, no commercial interruptions. Since network shows were pre-empted, the strategy all but guaranteed a captive audience, mostly because there weren’t other options.”

As a result, ratings for presidential debates declined over time. “Since then, however, ‘transformational shifts’ in television viewing – the plethora of cable channels, Internet streaming, and other ways to view video content – have dramatically eroded the power of the ‘roadblock,’ according to the Annenberg report, Williams (2015) writes. “Nielsen data show that the percent of U.S. TV households viewing the debates has declined from 60 percent in 1960 to about 38 percent in 2012.”

Those numbers also vary by age. “Although viewership numbers have increased somewhat since 1996, ‘the [Annenberg] report says, ‘the largest growth is among those aged 50-64, a cohort socialized in an earlier media era.’ They aren’t sticking

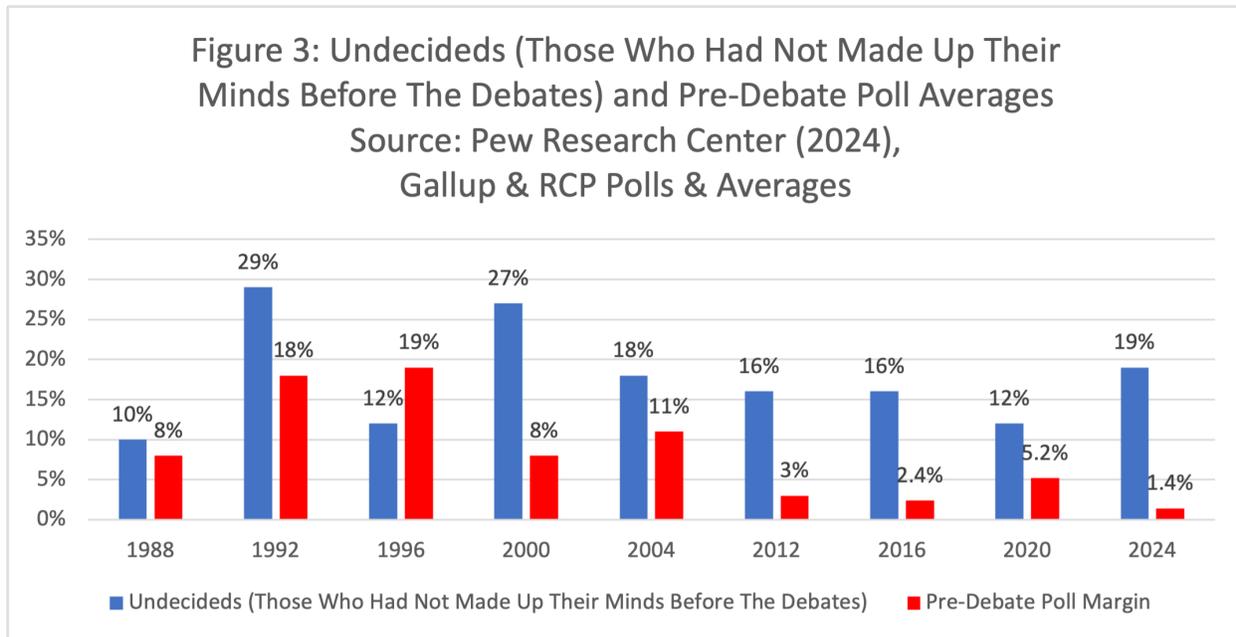


Figure 3. Pre-Debate Undecided Voters

with it, either: Barely one in five viewers aged 18 or older watched part of one presidential debate in 2012, and they only averaged about 40 minutes of viewing time per debate (Williams 2015).”

Williams (2015) cites more information from the Annenberg Presidential Debate Working Group, which contends that the new social media environment has changed how voters evaluate politics. “The new ‘news’ is often delivered in 140 characters, and a voter’s most trusted information is often a ‘friend’ from Facebook. Voting is conducted earlier and earlier, by mail and in person. Super PACs and other funding organizations play an increasing role.”

Optimism About Debate Watchers

Those who believe debates matter admit that there was a decline in viewership for a time, but the ratings have rebounded. Given the profusion of alternative channels to watch something other than the debate and modern-day distractions, these debate supporters find the high ratings quite remarkable.

Schrott and Lanoue (2013, 684-685) provide evidence to the critics who claim far fewer Americans watch debates, indicating that even with more competition from other channels and options, people watch presidential debates. “Even today, in an era in which the variety of entertainment choices far surpasses anything imaginable fifty years ago, televised debates still generate the sort of ratings more typical of hit comedies and major sports championships. Not only do politicians and their handlers continue to treat debates as significant campaign events,” but so too do many scholars of presidential politics.

DeSilver (2024) claims. “The four 1960 debates all had ratings of around 60.0, meaning roughly six-in-ten households with TV sets were tuned to the debates. When the debates were revived in 1976, their ratings were lower – generally around 50.0.”

Ratings for the debates trended lower over the next two decades. The third debate between Al Gore and George W. Bush in 2000 had just a 25.9 rating. Since then, debate ratings have generally trended modestly upward: The first Biden-Trump debate in 2020 drew a 40.2 rating (DeSilver 2024).

DeSilver (2024) adds comparative data to show that interest in the debates has rebounded in recent years. “Although viewership of the debates as a share of the total TV audience has broadly fallen over the decades, they can still attract more people than just about any other televised event besides the Super Bowl. More than 73 million people watched at least some of the first Trump-Biden debate in 2020, according to Nielsen Media Research. (Nielsen defines audience as viewers ages 2 and older.) That’s the third-largest debate audience ever, trailing only the first debate between Hillary Clinton and Trump in 2016 (84 million viewers) and the 1980 debate between President Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan (80.6 million).”

Watcher Hypothesis Evidence

To test which argument is stronger, I look at data provided by the Pew Research Center (2024). In Figure 4, I find that there was a decline in voter interest in debates at one time. From 1960 through 1992, viewership of presidential debates among

Americans saw 15 of 16 televised debates captivate more than 60 million Americans. The only one that failed to do so featured only Ronald Reagan and independent candidate John Anderson; President Jimmy Carter skipped in 1980.

From 1996 through 2008, only two debates (the first Bush-Kerry debate and the second Obama-McCain debate) topped 60 million viewers. Nearly half failed to top 50 million watchers during that time frame. But from 2012 through 2020, all but one debate (the third Obama-Romney debate) eclipsed the 60 million viewer mark. Three of the strongest four televised presidential debates occurred between 2016 and 2020 (Pew Research Center 2024).

There's a question about TV debate ratings that asks, "As compared to what?" *New York Times* Correspondent Michael Grynbaum writes, as cited by Ordway (2024). "The record for a presidential debate is 84 million viewers, for the first meeting in 2016 between Hillary Clinton and Mr. Trump. So Tuesday's bout between Ms. Harris and Mr. Trump — which will be simulcast on nearly every major network — could theoretically draw an audience akin to that of the final episodes of 'Seinfeld' (76.3 million) and 'Cheers' (80 million)."⁵

The Utility Hypothesis

In this hypothesis, I evaluate arguments concerning whether or not the debates offer meaningful information to the voters, or if these televised presidential debates merely provide pageantry, not substance.

Pessimism About A Debate's Utility

McKinney (2021, 149) provides a stinging critique of debates for being unhelpful to the average voter. "A common thread that runs throughout several of the studies contained in the current special issue of debate scholarship highlights the deficiencies with presidential candidates' debate dialogue and argumentation, with these analyses often concluding the electorate is ill-served by current practices in presidential debating, particularly with our general-election debates. Important questions are raised by a number of these studies as to the future of our presidential debates, including how they should be structured, how journalists and debate moderators can best facilitate candidate debate, and suggestions for the type of candidate debate dialogue that will produce a more informed voter."

McKinney was referring to the epic first Trump-Biden debate of 2020, where President Trump interrupted rival Joe Biden and Moderator Chris Wallace more than 120 times. While CNN's Jake Tapper called it a "dumpster fire," colleague Dana Bash said, "I'm just going to say it like it is. That was a sh*tshow. We're on cable, we can say that, apologies for being maybe a little bit crude, but that is really the phrase that I am getting from people on both sides of the aisle on texts, and it's the only phrase I can think of to really describe it (CNN 2020)."

Though the second 2020 presidential debate lacked the overt egregious behavior of the first debate, Rowland (2021) still concludes that the matches are more about "political theater" than "reasoned argument," lacking any substance to help the voter understand the issues and what's at stake.

According to some, the 2020 debates were simply one more case in a sea of increasing incivility. Scott, Chanslor, and Dixon (2021) use content analysis to find that polite tones and the use of honorifics in referring to an opponent have declined over time, replaced by less polite references and more hostile debate dialogue. Fallows (2008) takes issue with the questions asked by debate moderators. He attacks them for lacking substance in questions and avoiding the issues in favor of "gotcha" questions, "loaded hypothetical" questions, "puff" questions, and something called "the lightning round," where the candidates had thirty seconds to articulate their position on a measure, along with those "raise your hand" questions.

Golway (2004) joins the chorus of those decrying the debates for being useless. "Presidential debates aggravate one of the most serious flaws in modern American politics; they emphasize the entertainment value of politics,' says Richard Shenkman, editor of George Mason University's History News Network, www.hnn.us. 'They turn every voter into a theatergoer, and instead of asking whether a person's résumé is appropriate for the Presidency, they ask how a candidate performs on television. That's the wrong question; that's the worst question, because it's irrelevant to the office of the Presidency.' So is a candidate's pugilistic skill, yet before every debate, the press speculates on whether or not one of the candidates will administer a knockout blow. It has become the Godot of American presidential politics (Golway 2004)."

Optimism About A Debate's Utility

Not all find deficiencies with the debates themselves. In a study of debates from 1976 to 1996, Holbrook (1999) found that people who watch the debates learn more about the candidates, especially when they knew little about them in the first place. He adds "[T]here is some indication that those who are already politically engaged are the most likely to gain information from debates. There is a positive relationship between level of political knowledge and amount of information acquired from the debate, with the most knowledgeable being most strongly affected by the debates. A similar pattern is found when the sample is broken down according to partisanship, with partisans more strongly influenced by debate (Holbrook 1999, 82)."

⁵And this may not take into account other non-traditional means of viewership. My colleague and I streamed the 2024 debate into a packed auditorium full of college students.

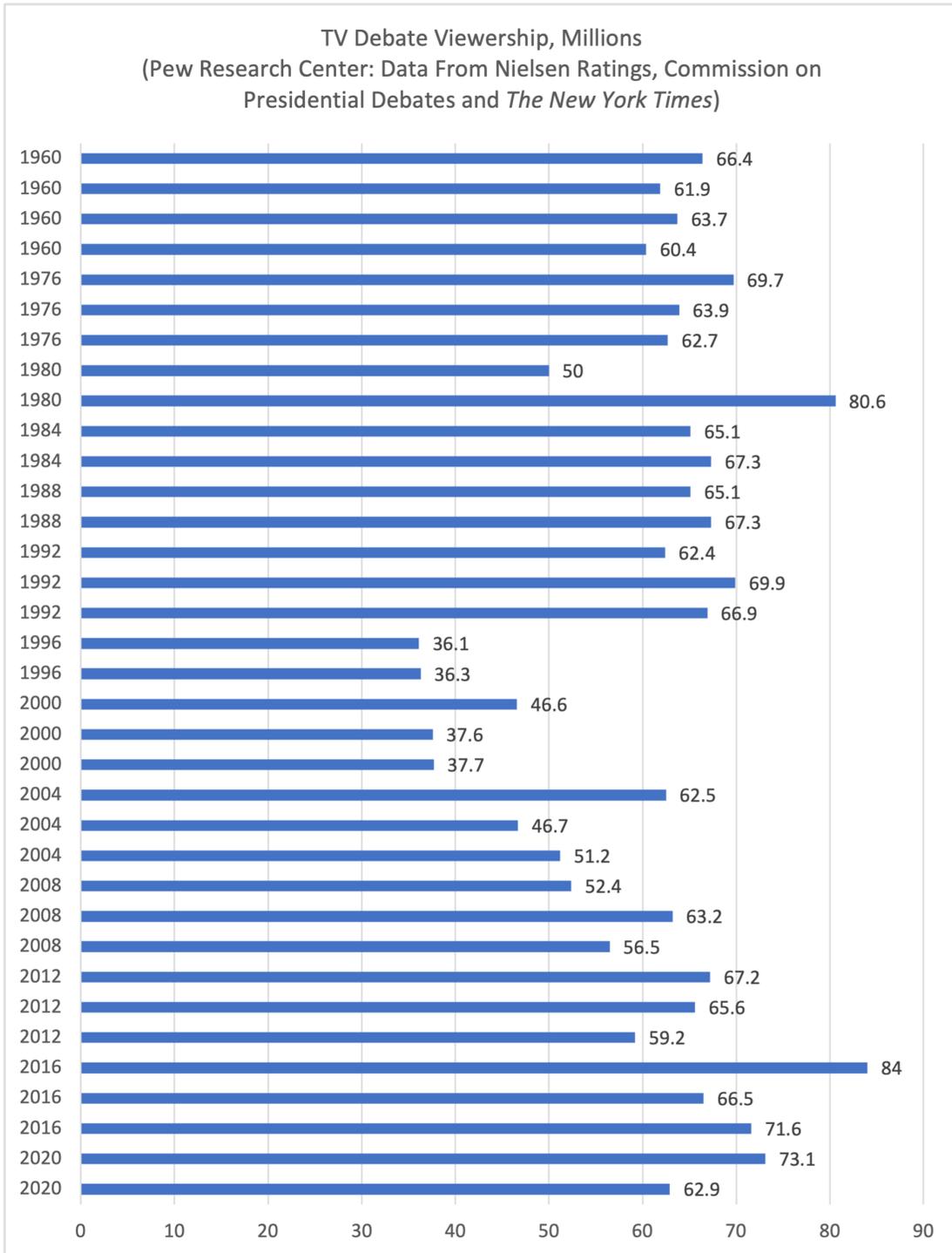


Figure 4. Presidential Debate Viewership

Jennings, Bramlett, Kenski, and Villanueva (2021) set up a study of more than 500 viewers of a 2020 debate segment on the economy. Respondents not only felt the debate helped them articulate their views on the issues, but also made them more willing to discuss their opinions with others.

Winneg and Jamieson (2017) found that increased debate viewership of the televised presidential debates increased issue knowledge. Zara (2020) adds this: “Past surveys have found that the majority of voters find debates at least somewhat useful in helping them decide which candidates to vote for. In 2008, 67% of Americans said as much about the debates between Senator John McCain and then-Senator Barack Obama, according to Pew Research. That was higher than the percentage who said the same thing in 1992.”

There’s one group that feels that the debates influenced them: the watchers, according to Wei, Lo, and Zhu (2019). “Because the televised debates provided an opportunity for voters to compare candidates’ attributes, issue positions, and policy preferences, findings show that respondents who watched the debates reported that the debates influenced them. These results make sense because exposure to televised debates, unlike undesirable messages such as attack ads, appeared to be informative and relevant to the curious or undecided voters (Wei, Lo, and Zhu 2019, 579).”

One would think that after McKinney’s blistering critique of the first 2020 debate that he wants debates scrapped. He doesn’t. “[T]here’s the argument that debates are not substantive and present no new information. If true, that makes a compelling case for eliminating them. However, our research shows these accusations are not based on what debate viewers believe, but rather on what political pundits think. Viewers want debates and the numbers prove it (Carlin and McKinney 2020).” McKinney doesn’t want debates to be terminated. He and his co-author, Diana Carlin, want better debates. Our reviews of hundreds of focus group transcripts since 1992 show that every group had members who said they learned something new. Knowledge gained from debates by first-time and leaning, but not committed, voters increase confidence in their choice and may even influence their decision to go to the polls at all (Carlin and McKinney 2020).” Carlin and McKinney (2020) particularly favor town-hall debates rather than those controlled by moderators or panels of journalists, as they feel these cover the issues more likely to be chosen as salient in public polls.

Debates are also an essential part of the democratic process, said Ed Lee III, who served as the Senior Director for Debate Deliberation and Dialogue at Emory University. He notes, “This is one of the few times in which we can find people who have different sets of policy preferences and choices coming together to talk about those, and they can serve to normalize that as a part of democratic discourse (Ali 2024).” Lee adds, “During debates, candidates “try to figure out how to communicate a set of arguments that are acceptable for a broad swath of the American society and so it tends to normalize the candidates in the eyes of those who disagree with them and it makes the transition from one party to the other a little easier (Ali 2024).”

Utility Hypothesis Evidence

Research of mine from the Pew Research Center (2024) data generally supports the utility hypothesis argument that contends the debates have value for the viewer. In only two elections in my survey, 1988 and 1996, a majority of Americans found the debates to be either “not too helpful” or “not at all helpful.”

Figure 5 shows that in a majority of other presidential elections (1992, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016), the reverse was true. In each of these elections, more than 60 percent of Americans surveyed found the debates to be either “helpful” or “somewhat helpful (Pew Research Center 2024).”

The Poll Impact Hypothesis

In this hypothesis, I evaluate whether televised presidential contests “move the needle” and alter the course of the campaigns, changing poll leads, narrowing the election gap in surveys, widening the margin in polls, or making no difference at all.

Pessimism About the Impact of Debates on Polls

“There’s this perception that debates are this great democratic tool, where voters can find out what candidates stand for and how good they really are,” says Vincent Pons, assistant professor of business administration. “But we find that debates don’t have any effect on any group of voters (Kost 2019).”

Campaigns may change minds, but the debates certainly don’t, according to Pons and Le Pennec and Pons (2023, 703). The authors write, “We use an event study to estimate the impact of TV debates, in which candidates themselves communicate with voters, and of shocks such as natural and technological disasters, which, by contrast, occur independently from the campaign. We do not find any effect of either type of event on vote choice formation, suggesting that information received throughout the campaign from other sources such as the media, political activists, and other citizens is more impactful.”

Any changes the authors find come from campaigns, not debates, Pons and Le Pennec contend. “High-profile TV debates didn’t increase the fraction of voters who had settled on a candidate nor the candidates’ vote shares. This suggests that voters who shift to another candidate are influenced by other types of information, such as media coverage of the campaign or personal discussions,” Kost (2019) reveals in an article on the authors’ work. Le Pennec and Pons find this effect of viewing debates (in

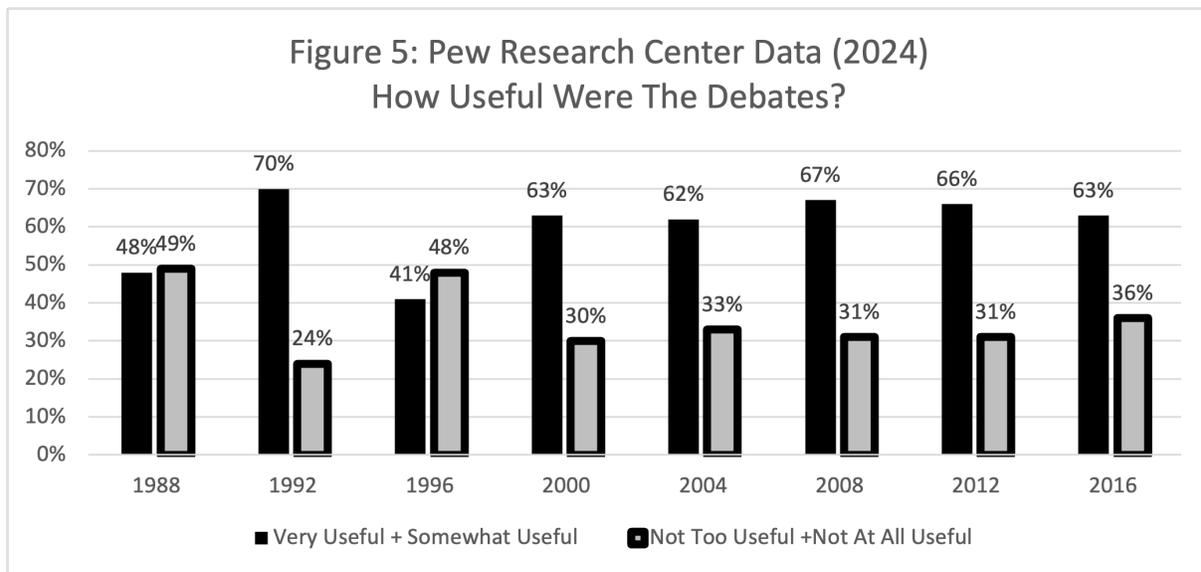


Figure 5. Debate Utility

a pre-debate vs. post-debate comparison of surveys) to be even more negligible among the younger voters polled, as well as those at the lower end of the education spectrum (Kost 2019).

This work by Le Penne and Pons (2023) examined more than 250,000 respondents from 62 elections and 56 TV debates across nine OECD countries, such as the United States, Canada, Germany, Sweden, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (Le Penne and Pons 2023). While campaigns do move voters (by double-digit percentage points), the policy preferences of the respondents in the survey (of which nearly 80 percent claimed to watch a debate) remained fairly static (Le Penne and Pons 2023).

Of televised presidential debates, Rutgers Political Science Professor Ross K. Baker writes, “these events really have become Punch and Judy shows for grown-ups, highly stylized pageants in which spontaneity is held to an absolute minimum. Rather than the vigorous cut and thrust of two candidates duking it out, we are presented with an over-rehearsed, mannered performance.” To back up this assertion, Baker states (2004, 21), “Something close to a draw will change even fewer minds, especially among the undecideds. This is borne out in an Oct. 3, 2000, USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll of people who had just watched the first George W. Bush-Gore debate. They were asked whether they had changed their votes as a result of the debate. Ninety-six percent said their preference remained the same as it had been before the debate.”

Zara (2020) agrees, arguing that “[i]t’s 2020, an age when polarization reigns supreme, facts have incredible difficulty penetrating the din of social-media misinformation, and one of the candidates is a former reality-TV star.”

Holbrook (1996) claims that “there is a very strong tendency for people to think that their preferred candidate won the debate.” However, even when the party faithful realize their own candidate performed poorly, they can still tell pollsters who they felt prevailed, but decide to stick with their pre-debate choice.

Schrott and Lanoue (2013) agree that debates don’t change minds. “In 1984, Walter Mondale was seen as the winner of his first debate with Ronald Reagan by an overwhelming margin of 54%–35%, despite the fact that he trailed Reagan by an almost identical percentage (55%–39%) in the pre-debate “horse race” polls. Clearly, some Reagan supporters were impressed enough with Mondale’s performance to overcome their biases and pick the Democrat as the winner. Nevertheless, even in this relatively extreme case, Reagan likely “held on” to roughly 2/3 of his backers, who insisted—in the face of a nearly unanimous pro-Mondale verdict from the press. . . .that the Gipper had bested his rival (Schrott and Lanoue 2013, 684-685).”

And it’s not just that people’s backing of a candidate remains relatively static. “No support was found for several possible moderator variables on issue knowledge, character perceptions, candidate competence, and vote preference: nature of subject pool (students, nonstudents), study design (pretest/posttest, viewers/nonviewers), number of days between debate and election, or data collection method (public opinion poll or experimenter data),” state Benoit, Hansen and Verser (2003, 335-336). Interestingly enough, the authors found the role of the first debate to have a bigger generative effect on voter preference, but not significantly more for other variables (Benoit, Hansen and Verser, 2003).

Du Quenoy (2024) provides the result of a CNN snap poll of more than 600 registered voters. Harris won the clear majority of this group, 63 percent to 37 percent for Donald Trump. Yet a deep dive into follow-up questions may reveal more about who really won. “An ancillary question in the same CNN poll found that the percentage of voters favoring Trump on the issue [the

economy] actually *increased* over a pre-debate finding, from 53% to 55%, giving him a commanding 20-point lead over Harris. Our nation's 45th president also maintained his decisive pre-debate leads over Harris on immigration (56-33%) and serving as commander in chief (49-43%)," Du Quenoy (2024) argues. He admits Harris boosted herself slightly in the categories of favorability and "better understands the problems of ordinary people."

But when it came time to determine whether performance led to preference, most (82 percent) said the debate didn't change anything, while 14 percent claimed it would make them reconsider their vote. Less than five percent said it would actually change their vote (Du Quenoy 2024).

An evaluation of independent voters by the United Kingdom political research firm J. L. Partners showed that Harris had a six-point lead in determining who won the debate, but a nearly equal margin (6-7 percentage points) of independents claimed they would still support Trump (Du Quenoy 2024).

Optimism About the Impact of Debates on Polls

However, there are those in journalism and academia who claim that televised presidential debates are game changers during the campaigns. The former group focuses on key zingers or candidate gaffes that alter the course of the debates, and therefore the direction of the presidential contest. The latter finds that voters are likely to be swayed by the debate outcomes, as measured in voter surveys.

Gaffes and Zingers

Many analyses of presidential debates have focused upon critical moments in the debate, either a zinger delivered by the winning candidate or a gaffe by the losing candidate. Chaddock and Grier (2024) insist "[l]osing a debate can lose elections. That is part of the problem for those who participate in them. So for instance, you can, as President Gerald Ford did, suddenly 'free Poland' in a 1976 debate, accidentally saying it was a free country. And that can be a mistake that the press harps on. But that brings up a point in that it is often the press coverage of debates that matters more than the debates themselves. With Gerald Ford, the press hit on this to say: "Well, Gerald Ford, a nice guy, not really up to the mental demands of the office."

Zara (2020) adds the gaffe example of the 1992 election, "when Bill Clinton and Ross Perot faced off against incumbent President George H.W. Bush (who glanced at his watch in one of the most infamously fatal debate moments in TV history)."

On the other hand, a great line can produce a debate victory, according to Chaddock and Grier (2024). "Well, a comment in a debate can make a career, but it doesn't necessarily win an election. For instance, in the vice-presidential debate between Lloyd Bentsen and Dan Quayle, Lloyd Bentsen had the well-remembered line: 'I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy.'"

Kost (2019) adds other examples of supposed "make or break" moments in televised candidate debates. "These debates are often great moments of television," Pons says. "We all remember the gaffes that candidates make as well as the memorable comebacks. Debates are entertaining." Who could forget Trump calling Clinton a "nasty woman" during their final debate in October 2016? Or Ronald Reagan's witty response to concerns about his age that arose in his 1984 debate with Walter Mondale: "I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience?"

This has created an entire industry searching for critical moments in debate, from appearances to certain lines to behavior.⁶ "As a consequence, every election year brings a new analysis of the personal attributes and dramatic moments that have supposedly shaped the outcomes of these events and turned certain debates—rather than others—into milestones in American political history: Richard Nixon's make-up woes in 1960; Gerald Ford's gaffe about Soviet domination of Eastern Europe in 1976; Ronald Reagan's grandfatherly dismissal of Jimmy Carter's verbal assaults ("There you go again. . .") in 1980; Michael Dukakis' oddly robotic response in 1988 to a question about the death penalty that invoked the hypothetical rape and murder of his wife; Al Gore's dismissive sighs in 2000; and, more recently, Barack Obama's unruffled self-confidence vs. John McCain's nervous intensity (Schrott and Lanoue 2013, 684)."⁷

Chaddock and Grier (2024) argue that candidate movements on the stage matter as well. "[T]he debates that former President Donald Trump has been involved in have been significant. They did sway at least a few votes. Much of that has to do with Mr. Trump's behavior in them, as much as anything that he said. For instance, with Hillary Clinton, he ... physically followed her around the stage in a way that some people may have seen as an exertion of dominance, but many others saw as

⁶Williams (2015) also contends that debates have become more important based upon how wealthy supporters of a candidate evaluate their debate prowess. "How people perform in debates is important because they can influence elites' behavior," says Andra Gillespie, a political scientist at Emory University in Atlanta. Perform poorly, and leading candidates might "see their [billionaire] backers, their supporters, pull away and stop investing in their campaigns," she says. Though it speaks to plutocrats' influence over politics, she says, "These things are important and we would be remiss to not acknowledge that." This is confirmed when major figures in the Democratic Party began to withdraw support from Biden after his disastrous debate performances.

⁷In their coverage of the 2008 presidential debates, Schrott and Lanoue (2008) contend that Hillary Clinton's problems occurred long before Barack Obama's surge in the Iowa Caucus. Her lead began to evaporate based upon an answer concerning whether or not she supported New York Governor Eliot Spitzer's policy enabling illegal immigrants to apply for driver's licenses, a case of looking at a single presidential primary debate, not just those held between the nominees in the Fall of the election season.

creepy.” Stewart (2015) found that candidates increased their chances of winning the debate by eliciting audience laughter and applause.

But there are limits to this approach. “The difficulty with this sort of analysis-by-anecdote is that it assumes, at least implicitly, that candidates invariably win or lose debates on the strength of their performances,” write Schrott and Lanoue (2013, 684-685). “This tends to overinflate the importance of these minor moments and minimize broader evaluations of candidates.”

Debate Impacts Measured by Voter Studies

While mistakes and quips garner headlines, we need more evidence from voter surveys before we can conclude that debates can alter the course of campaigns.

Geer (1988) disagrees with arguments that presidential debates rarely change voter views of candidates. Using several panel studies and polls from CBS in conjunction with *The New York Times*, he finds “[w]hile the results show that many individuals’ preferences were reinforced, there also appeared to be sizable potential for debates to change citizens’ preferences—especially among those respondents who were undecided or were weakly committed to one of the candidates. These findings imply that debates may have a greater effect on the outcome of elections than previously thought (Geer 1988, 486).”

Benoit, Hansen, and Verser (2003, 335-336) conduct a meta-analysis to determine the overall impact of viewing presidential debates. “General campaign debates increase issue knowledge and issue salience (the number of issues a voter uses to evaluate candidates) and can change preference for candidates’ issue stands,” the authors find. “Debates can have an agenda-setting effect. Debates can alter perceptions of the candidates’ personality, but they do not exert a significant effect on perceptions of the candidates’ competence (leadership ability). Debates can affect vote preference. Primary debates increase issue knowledge, influence perceptions of candidates’ character, and can alter voter preferences (the effect sizes for these variables are larger in primary than general debates).”

Fridkin et.al. (2017) find voters to be moved by candidate messages about personality, policy, and performance in the authors’ study of the final 2004 presidential debate. “However, the impact of the candidates’ messages was often altered by the media’s instant analyses. In addition, the debate, as well as media coverage of the debate, influenced how citizens “framed” the outcome of the debate. And, the debate and subsequent news coverage ‘primed’ certain considerations for citizens (Fridkin et.al. 2017, 770).”

The Curious Case of the 2024 Election

In our analysis of the poll impact hypothesis and the election impact hypothesis, we are left with the dilemma of the most unusual debate cycle in American history. The first debate among party frontrunners was held before either party’s convention, the only time that has happened since televised presidential debates began in the United States. A leading party candidate dropped out after the first debate. The major party candidates on the final ballot only met once, which has happened only one other time (in 1980). The sole 2024 televised presidential debate took place on September 10, 2024, one of the earliest presidential debates on record. No presidential debates between the nominees were held during the crucial month of October, the only time that has happened since such debates began. It’s the only time in U.S. presidential debates where the final battle was between the vice-presidential candidates. And that occurred more than a month before Election Day.

The only solution to incorporate this unprecedented year is to report the data from the 1960 – 2020 debates and then note the 2024 findings as accurately as possible. It also means incorporating data from two different time moments (the first two debates, the first two poll movements).

Poll Impact Hypothesis Evidence

To determine whether debate performances can change surveys indicating candidate support, I follow the same guidelines as the data from the Undecided Hypothesis. This means utilizing Gallup Poll data from 1960 to 2008 (Saad 2008; Gallup Polling 2008).

For the elections after 2008, I used data from RealClearPolitics (RCP) averages for 2012, 2016, 2020, 2024a, and 2024b. This is calculated by taking the average of the five closest non-partisan polls from before the date of the first debate that did not overlap the first debate date. This was compared to the average of the five post-debate polls from dates that did not overlap the final debate. Only non-partisan polls were used from RCP’s numbers.

In this table,⁸ we look at whether there was a lead change, whether the campaign moved several percentage points to come within five points of the opponent, or whether a neck-and-neck race moved to a lead well beyond a five-point difference.

As you can see, in the majority of cases, the debates did “move the needle” in the election. In three cases (1960, 1980, 2000), the candidate who was trailing before the debates moved into the lead with a sizeable swing in the polls. In two other races (1976, 2004), the front-runner lost a double-digit lead from before the polls to after the polls. In two other cases (2008, 2016), the polls went from neck-and-neck to a wider lead for the front-runner. And in 2024, the losing candidate (Biden)

⁸* = Gallup Polling Data; ** = RealClearPolitics Data; *** = Losing candidate dropped out after the debate.

Table 1. Comparing Pre-Debate Polls with Post-Debate Polls

Election	Pre-Debate	Post-Debate	Lead Change Or Impactful Poll Movement
1960*	Nixon +1	Kennedy +4	Yes
1976*	Carter +15	Carter +5	Yes
1980*	Carter +3	Reagan +3	Yes
1984*	Reagan +17	Reagan +17	No
1988*	Bush Sr. +8	Bush Sr. +9	No
1992*	Clinton +18	Clinton +12	No
1996*	Clinton +19	Clinton +24	No
2000*	Gore +8	Bush Jr. +4	Yes
2004*	Bush Jr. +11	Bush Jr. +3	Yes
2008*	Obama +2	Obama +7	Yes
2012**	Obama +3	Obama +1	—
2016**	Clinton +2.4	Clinton +7.2	Yes
2020**	Biden +5.2	Biden +9.6	No
2024**	Trump +1.4	Trump +3.4	Yes***
2024**	Harris +0.8	Harris +3	—

dropped out of the race after a poor debate performance, making it difficult to suggest that year that debates do not matter (Long, Miller and Superville 2024). In two other examples (2012, 2024), the polls tightened within the margin of error.⁹

Therefore, in eight cases, debates were found to matter. In five, they did not, and in two, the race stayed close, with movement but within the margin of error. The results clearly cast doubt on the argument that debates don’t matter or rarely do matter.

The Election Impact Hypothesis

In this hypothesis, I look at whether winning the presidential debates matters on Election Day. Do the candidates who prevail also win at the ballot box? I look at those who win the initial debate, those who finish first in a majority of these contests, as well as a measure that works in vice-presidential debates, and one that evaluates the margin of victory.

Pessimism About the Impact of Debates on Elections

Historically, research has suggested that presidential debates have a negligible effect on outcomes (Ali 2024). According to post-election surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center from 1988 through 2016 (2024), while voters found the debates useful, they did not find them necessarily determinative.

The results were similar in a widely cited study published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* in 2023, which found that debates “neither increase individual vote choice consistency nor reduce the distance to final vote shares,” adding that they, in fact, “move a small fraction of voters away from their final vote choice, in the short term (Le Pennec and Pons 2023).”

McKinney and Carlin (2004) address claims that voters do not base their vote choice on how the candidates perform in the debates.

One reason that many conclude that debates don’t matter is that they overemphasize the role of the first debate in the series (Baker 2004). My original research (Tures 2024a) found that the winner of the first debate only won less than half of all ballot box contests before the 2024 election. Looking at the data that includes the two “first debates” of 2024 (there were two first debates: Trump-Biden and Trump-Harris), the winner of the first debate won only six of 15 cases (see Table 2).

That means that in 14 elections and 15 debate cases, the first debate winners have won six of these contests (1960, 1980, 1996, 2008, 2020, 2024). In the other nine cases, the first debate winners went on to lose at the ballot box (1976, 1984, 1988, 1992, 2000, 2004, 2012, 2016, 2024*). That’s a poor election rate for the winners of the first presidential debate. Even if you leave off the controversial cases of 2024, the first debate winner loses a majority of the time. This could be influencing media perceptions that the debate winners don’t win on Election Day.

⁹The final debate of 2024 was a vice-presidential debate. The Harris-Walz team went from a 4.6 percent lead to a 2.2 percent lead, according to RealClearPolitics averages for both.

Table 2. First Presidential Debate Winners and Election Winners

Year	1st Debate Winner	Victor?
1960	John F. Kennedy	Yes
1976	Gerald Ford	No
1980	Ronald Reagan	Yes
1984	Walter Mondale	No
1988	Michael Dukakis	No
1992	Ross Perot	No
1996	Bill Clinton	Yes
2000	Al Gore	No
2004	John Kerry	No
2008	Barack Obama	Yes
2012	Mitt Romney	No
2016	Hillary Clinton	No
2020	Joe Biden	Yes
2024	Donald Trump	Yes
2024	Kamala Harris	No

Optimism About the Impact of Debates on Elections

Schrott (1990) looks at candidates who are perceived to be the “winner” of the election debate, and how the contest at the ballot box goes. Probit “models are run for the 1972, 1976, 1980, and 1983 elections in West Germany. The results show that there is a consistent impact of “winning” the debate on individual voting choices in West Germany; controlling for party and other factors, there is a significantly higher probability of voting for the party of the politician the respondent feels won the contest (Schrott 1990, 567),” leading him to conclude that winning a televised presidential debate does matter.

In their analysis of the 2001 Norwegian parliamentary election, Aalberg and Jenssen (2007) find that televised presidential debate outcomes do matter, with victory in these making a difference in the elections. “In 2001 almost half of the Norwegian electorate made this decision during the election campaign. These trends suggest that television and the broadcasted panel debates have become a crucial factor for parties who want to convince voters that their party deserves their vote. Winning or losing important television debates may have important consequences for the parties’ election results (Aalberg and Jenssen 2007, 116).”

In the United States, large-n studies have been undertaken that look at the link between debate success and electoral victory. “Semantic network analyses of all U.S. presidential debates (1960–2004) were conducted,” write Doerfel and Connaughton (2007, 201). “Results reveal that regardless of party affiliation, election winners were more central in their semantic networks than losers. Although the study does not argue causation between debating and electoral outcomes, results show a consistent pattern: Candidates who develop coherent, central, semantically structured messages in debates seem to be victorious on election day.” In explaining the path to debate performance and winning the election, the authors add “the eventual winner’s semantic networks, regardless of specific topics, contained repeated and interrelated themes that were used to frame answers throughout the debate. These results allow a cautious claim regarding the importance of centrality, achieved semantically with both repetition and linking or networking key messages throughout various aspects of debate communication content (Doerfel and Connaughton (2007, 213).”

Carlin and McKinney (2020) note that in close elections, narrow margins in a few battleground states, debates made the difference. “Our research with pre- and post-debate surveys consistently shows that debates influence undecided and wavering viewers (Carlin and McKinney 2020).

Research on debates after the first contest shows that candidates who win the next few debates do better on Election Day (Tures 2024b). “I found that the winner of the second debate has historically done much better at winning the presidency. John F. Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton twice, George W. Bush, Barack Obama twice and Joe Biden all prevailed in the second debates held in their respective election years and went on to success in the fall elections later that year. . . .Overall, the record for success in the final debate, whether it is the second debate or more, is 66.7% of contests, which is not bad, but not as good as the results from the second debate for the winner (Tures 2024c).”

Election Impact Hypothesis Evidence

Large N studies with extensive polls, like the one by Pons and Le Pennec cited by Kost (2019), as well as the meta-analysis by Benoit, Hansen, and Verser (2003), and the panel studies of polls by Geer (1988) are relatively rare in the analysis of

Table 3. Final Presidential Debate Winners and Election Winners

Year	Final Debate Winning Party	Presidential Popular Vote	Debate Win = President Popular Vote Win?	Post-Debate Poll	Presidential Popular Vote	Presidential Popular Vote Win?
1960	DEM +4	DEM +0.17	Yes	DEM +4	DEM +0.17	Yes
1976	DEM +5	DEM +2.07	Yes	DEM +5	DEM +2.07	Yes
1980	REP +18	REP +9.74	Yes	REP +3	REP +9.74	Yes
1984	REP +3	REP +18.21	Yes	REP +17	REP +18.21	Yes
1988	REP +9	REP +7.72	Yes	REP +9	REP +7.72	Yes
1992	IND +9	DEM +5.56	No	DEM +12	DEM +5.56	Yes
1996	DEM +30	DEM +8.51	Yes	DEM +24	DEM +8.51	Yes
2000	DEM +2	DEM +0.51	Yes*	REP +4	DEM +0.51	No*
2004	DEM +13	REP +2.47	No	REP +3	REP +2.47	Yes
2008	DEM +27	DEM +7.72	Yes	DEM +7	DEM +7.72	Yes
2012	DEM +8	DEM +3.86	Yes	DEM +1	DEM +3.86	Yes
2016	DEM +29	DEM +2.09	Yes*	DEM +7.2	DEM +2.09	Yes*
2020	DEM +14	DEM +4.45	Yes	DEM +9.6	DEM +4.45	Yes
2024	REP +2	REP +1.48	Yes	REP +3.4	REP +1.48	Yes**
2024	DEM +26	REP +1.48	No	DEM +3	REP +1.48	No**

presidential debate impacts. Most tend to zero in on a particular case study to see why a specific debate, or series of debates from a single election, determined the winner of the election.

In this analysis, I look at televised presidential debates between nominees, and not primary debates and polls. The post-election polls come from Gallup, supplemented by CNN and *Newsweek* among other cases, when Gallup surveys are unavailable (these are added to the works cited page). These are supplemented with survey results from vice-presidential debates as well. I also look at who won the first presidential debate, the second presidential debate, and cases with three or more presidential debates, and their connection to November electoral outcomes.

In Table 3,¹⁰ you can see that there are 14 elections included in this sample, as well as 15 cases. Results show that the final debate winner goes on to win the presidential popular vote in 12 of 15 cases. Even if we replaced the popular vote winner measure with the Electoral College, the final debate winner prevails 66.67 percent of the time. If we removed the 2024 election cases, nearly 70 percent of the elections in the Electoral College are won by the final debate winner. For the popular vote winner, the final debate winner takes that contest 84.6% of the time, if we exclude the 2024 cases.

The results are even stronger when we look at the candidates' poll standing after the final debate, instead of asking who won the last debate. In 13 of 15 cases, the candidate leading the polls after the final debate won the popular vote. The leader of the post-debate poll wins 12 of 13 cases (not including 2024) if we include the Electoral College, or 13 of 15 if 2024 is added. No matter how you measure it, winning the final debate and/or leading the polls immediately after the debate matters for winning on Election Day.

Debates are not perfect predictors of everything about elections. I ran a test for correlation between the survey margin of victory in the final debate and the margin of victory in the popular vote, receiving a Pearson Correlation Coefficient of 0.142. The polls for the candidates' position after the final debates are a much better link to the Election Day margin of victory in the popular vote, with a Pearson Correlation Coefficient of 0.609.

I have researched the timing of presidential debates, whether they are the first one (Tures 2024a), or a subsequent debate, presidential or vice-presidential (Tures 2024b, Tures 2024c, Tures 2024d).¹¹ In this section, I examine the connection between overall debate winners (who win the majority of televised contests) and the results on Election Day. I also run a second set of numbers, including the vice-presidential debate winners¹², along with the presidential debate winners, for a total number of

¹⁰* = The winner of the popular vote lost the Electoral College; ** = There were two separate Democratic Party candidates. Results from both contests were included here.

¹¹Indeed, of all cases of vice-presidential debates (1976, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2020 and 2024), the poll winner of these debates has gone on to be the next vice-president, with only one exception: Lloyd Bentsen, who easily bested Dan Quayle. That's more than a 90 percent success rate (Tures 2024d). Circumstances made 2024 odd in so many ways, resulted in a vice-presidential debate being the last word in that televised series of contests. Senator J. D. Vance's narrow win over Governor Tim Walz, and his demonstrated ability to overcome many prior gaffes brought confidence back to the GOP after polls showed Harris outperforming Trump in their sole matchup.

¹²The inclusion of vice-presidential debates among our cases in a second analysis may seem controversial. But there are several factors to note. First, a

Table 4. The Connection Between Presidential Debate Winners and Election Winners

Election Year	Presidential Debate Overall Results (Who Won More Contests)	Did The Debate Winner Win Popular Vote?	Including VP Debates With Presidential Debates (Who Won More Contests)	Election Winner	Did The Debate Winner Win Popular Vote?
1960	Democratic	Yes	Democratic	Democratic	Yes
1976	Democratic	Yes	Democratic	Democratic	Yes
1980	Republican	Yes	Republican	Republican	Yes
1984	Split	—	Republican	Republican	Yes
1988	Split	—	Democratic	Republican	No
1992	Independent	No	Split	Democratic	—
1996	Democratic	Yes	Democratic	Democratic	Yes
2000	Democratic	Yes	Split	Democratic	—*
2004	Democratic	Yes*	Democratic	Republican	No
2008	Democratic	Yes	Democratic	Democratic	Yes
2012	Democratic	Yes	Democratic	Democratic	Yes
2016	Democratic	Yes*	Democratic	Democratic	Yes*
2020	Democratic	Yes	Democratic	Democratic	Yes
2024	Split	—	Republican	Republican	Yes

debate successes, linking that to how the debate winners perform before the voters at the ballot box. The results are found in Table 4.

There were three cases where the presidential debates were split in the outcome, with no winner (1984, 1988, and 2024). In the other 11 cases, the overall debate winner won the presidential popular vote ten times (1992 was the exception, when Perot won two of the three debates). In 72.7% of cases, the candidate who won the most votes also won the Electoral College.

If we include the televised vice-presidential contests along with the presidential debates in Table 4, the overall debate winners win 10 of 12 times on Election Day, or nine of 12 times in the Electoral College (the two splits were in 1992 and 2000).

Early losses by front-runners in 1984, 1988, 1992, and 2012 did not hurt the leaders, as they were able to recover in subsequent debate contests and restore that momentum. In other cases, like 1996 and 2008, the front-runner debated well and held that lead. Just because the leader did not make mistakes did not mean the debate did not “matter” if voters did not change their preferences.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this research, I noted the debate about whether or not it is worth even having presidential debates. Critics claim debates shouldn’t be held because people make up their minds about the candidates beforehand, are less likely to watch, and don’t get anything useful out of these contests. Furthermore, the debate naysayers believe these contests do not move the polls and do not really matter on Election Day.

Evidence from this paper shows that in nearly every case, there are enough undecided voters out among the electorate for the debates to make a difference in the election. Viewership did decline decades ago, but ratings have shown that debate watching has rebounded, even with more alternatives available to Americans than just three channels. And those who do tune in are more likely to find them useful than to find them unhelpful.

Evidence from polls shows that in a majority of cases, the debates have moved the polls, narrowed contests, and widened leads; others remained within the margin of error. Few cases had little or no impact whatsoever. And in a series of hypothesis tests, we find that whether you win the last debate, win a majority of debates, and/or lead in the polls after the debates, you are

vice-presidential debate was the final debate of the 2024 election cycle. Second, vice-presidential debates do have consequences, as Benoit and Airne (2005, 225) claim when they quote 2004 vice-presidential debate moderator Gwen Ifill who asked “what qualifies you to be a heartbeat away?” Benoit and Airne (2005, 225) find “Furthermore, it is clear that voters see value in vice presidential debates. Focus group participants in 1992 indicated that these encounters ‘served to highlight the presidential candidate’s decision making and provided insight into the abilities of the vice presidential candidate. . . .millions have watched the vice presidential debates. Research shows that watching vice presidential debates can influence opinions.” The authors conclude “The many important similarities between presidential and vice presidential debates suggest that the constraints of the situation strongly influence the discourse of these important campaign events (Benoit and Airne 2005, 233).”

going to do well on Election Day, whether the study looks at the presidential popular vote or the Electoral College results. One only needs to look at the 2024 election to see the consequences of a poor debate performance.

But there's another factor to consider that is more important than my measures of debate viewing, reactions, polls, and election results. It's that debates are perhaps good for democracy. Millions of Americans can see political rivals share the stage and generally articulate policy differences without resorting to force. As Godwin and Joubert once reasoned, that's the best reason to debate important questions, even if there is no conclusive winner. Because the alternative is to conclusively settle questions without so much as even a debate.

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The Rise of Political Polarization and Democratic Backsliding*

Alyssa Archer¹

¹Valdosta State University

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ABSTRACT

Why are democracies around the world declining? James Dean claims there are “four pathways to backsliding. The most dominant one . . . executive aggrandizement.” (2024). In this paper, I argue that the rise of political polarization is a primary cause of democratic decline. But what influences political polarization? Morgan Kelly claims “polarization is produced and influenced. . . by the actions and interactions of individual voters, people in power. . .” (2021). My analysis is built on Kelly’s theory using the Varieties of Democracy dataset. I used various control variables, such as mass mobilization and political violence, to determine if political polarization helped cause democracy to decline. Employing both a factor analysis and an OLS multiple regression, my findings suggest that there is a significant relationship between democratic backsliding and political polarization.

Introduction

Democratic backsliding is a process of political change in which countries that enjoy a certain level of democracy become significantly less democratic. Carothers and Press argue that two conditions must be completed for democratic backsliding to take place: “countries must achieve a significant level of democracy and then experienced significant erosion of democratic institutions.” (Carothers and Press, 2022). With this, policymakers and political analysts have debated why countries are achieving these conditions and why each year, democracy continues to backslide. As mentioned, some believe that it is due to Russia and China, while others believe it is due to the role of technology. Even though these factors play somewhat of a role, political polarization leads to democratic backsliding, which will be shown throughout the paper.

Over the past two decades, democracies across the globe have begun to backslide, ending what has been called the third wave of democratization. Political scientists and policymakers have given various explanations for this change. Some argue that Russia and China’s support for autocracy has undermined various democracies across the globe. Others argue that the role of technology or the socioeconomic factors creates democratic backsliding.

In this paper, I argue that a primary drive of democratic backsliding is political polarization. Political polarization “emphasizes the simultaneous presence of opposing or conflicting principles, tendencies, or points of view.” (Fiorina and Abrams, 2008). Political polarization becomes a threat to democracy when segments of the population become so divided that they become incapable of compromise or accepting their opponents as legitimate leaders of the country, even when those opponents won a free and fair election. Using the V-Dem dataset, I demonstrate that there is a statistically significant relationship between democratic backsliding and the level of political polarization in a country, even when considering other possible causes of backsliding.

Polarization and Democratic Backsliding in the Literature

Since the mid-2000s, global levels of democracy have steadily declined. According to the 2023 report “Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot” made by Varieties of Democracy, the world is evenly divided with 91 democratic countries and 88 autocracies. With this, it is clearly shown that a “momentous expansion of democracy that began in the 19th century and continued for much of the 20th century, has at best paused and more likely declined in the 21st century.” (V-Dem, 2022). By providing these facts regarding the total number of democracies and autocracies, many analysts have claimed that the third wave of democracy has ended:

The first “long” wave of democratization began in the 1820s with the expansion of suffrage in the United States establishing 29 democracies, however, it receded after Mussolini came to power in Italy in 1922, reducing the number of democracies to 12 marking the first “reverse wave.” The second wave occurred when the Allied Powers won World War II, resulting in 36 democracies by 1962. However, the second reverse wave occurred in 1960–1975 reducing the count to 30 democracies (Huntington, 1991).

In his article, “Democracy’s Third Wave,” Samuel P. Huntington also went on to list reasons that potentially contributed to both the first and second democratic reverse waves, which also goes on to show that my theory, the rise of political polarization leads to democratic backsliding, is correct. He claims that “. . . the weakness of democratic values among key elite groups and the general public” (1991) was one of the first contributing factors. This factor represents democratic backsliding because it shows a decline in the quality of democracy. Huntington’s second factor that he believed contributed to the reverse waves is “social and political polarization, often produced by leftist governments seeking the rapid introduction of major social and economic reforms” (1991). With this, he claims that social and political polarization leads to democratic backsliding. However, the leftist party that he claims produced all the reforms was truly known as the Republicans, like Donald Trump, that we know today.

However, some political analysts claim that political polarization is not the cause of democratic backsliding. In their article, Carothers and Press claim that political polarization is often an effect of autocratization rather than a cause of democracy’s decline. They go into further detail claiming, “many of the current cases of severe political polarization are places where polarization surged only after a polarizing autocratizer came to office and used divisive language and strategies to entrench themselves and justify undemocratic actions.” (2022). The authors then went on to claim that polarization is not a significant element in democratic backsliding, however three categories are key elements: “grievance-fueled illiberalism, opportunistic authoritarianism, and entrenched-interest revanchism.” (2022). In other words, Carothers and Press claim that only government officials can cause backsliding through their displays of grievances, undercutting democratic accountability, and using undemocratic means to reassert themselves as politicians. These factors regarding politicians do affect democracy; however, the authors fail to realize that in a democracy, it is not only about the government, but also the people who elected them to their positions.

Many other analysts have also concluded that polarization is a significant element in democratic backsliding and have demonstrated both Carothers and Press wrong in their theory. For example, Yunus Emre Orhan created an extended version that includes affective polarization scores, allowing him to conduct the first-ever cross-national study of affective polarization. By creating this, he aimed to demonstrate that polarization is a truly significant factor that contributes to democratic backsliding. In his article “The Relationship between Affective Polarization and Democratic Backsliding: Comparative Evidence,” Orhan claims:

Polarization is more likely to become pernicious when it diffuses society and creates mutually distrustful “us” versus “them” political camps who gradually view other party members as an existential threat. In this sense, affective divisions appear as one of the major causal mechanisms that produce the harmful effects of pernicious polarization on democracy (Orhan, 2022).

With this, Orhan’s findings show that polarization is steadily increasing globally, which is resulting in a future change that involves the increase of democratic backsliding. He then goes on to claim many distinct factors at both the macro and micro levels. On the macro-level, Orhan claims that “. . . these factors mainly include economic inequality, collusion between economic and political elites, government weakness” (2022) and many more. On the other hand, at the micro-level, he highlights dynamics that account for citizen behavior, such as “uncertainty, differing norms, disbelief in democracy, ideologically far oppositions, and ideological polarization” (2022). With this, Orhan accounts for the fact that the center of the political scale is slowly starting to eliminate itself since parties are situating themselves on the opposing extremes. By realizing this, we can slowly start to analyze that the politically active are becoming more polarized, specifically regarding political matters involving their feelings. With this realization, political polarization is rising, causing democracy to backslide.

Analysis

My research is based on the Varieties of Democracy dataset, also known as “V-Dem.” V-Dem is the largest global dataset on democracy with over 31 million data points for 202 countries from 1789 all the way to 2023 with a total of 4,616 variables. I focused on 6 variables. The dependent variable was the level of democracy. In order to produce a single measure of the level of democracy, I conducted a factor analysis that condensed the information of various democracy scales that were available in the V-Dem dataset. These scales included five different types of democracy, such as electoral and liberal, to create my democracy variable to show how political polarization can affect democratic backsliding.

As shown below in Tables 1 and 2, a factor analysis was run to demonstrate the democracy scale used throughout the data. It was calculated by combining all democracy indices from V-Dem’s dataset, which included electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and equalitarian. (In this factor analysis, questions asked respondents to rate each democracy which they achieved with the scale being 0–1, 0 being low extent and 1 being high.) With the table, it is shown that the various levels of democracy were so closely related that they created one main dimension and the 4 others to make the total add up to 100. The extraction between the several types of democracy is labeled in the communalities, while the different dimensions that the factor analysis created are shown in the total variance explained table below.

Table 1. Table 1: Democracy Index Created by Factor Analysis Communalities (Extraction)

Electoral Democracy Index	.975
Liberal Democracy Index	.986
Participatory Democracy Index	.965
Deliberative Democracy Index	.973
Equalitarian Democracy Index	.959

Table 2. Total Variance Explained

Component	Total	Initial Eigenvalues	% of Variance
1	4.858	97.151	
2	.065	1.302	
3	.036	.723	
4	.026	.522	
5	.015	.302	

I also used a range of independent variables: political polarization, mass mobilization, political violence, polarization of society, and national party control. In the dataset, political polarization was known as the extent of political differences affecting social interactions. The values ranged from 0–4, with 0 being no extent, friendly manner, to 4 being a significant extent, hostile manner. As mentioned above in the introduction subheading, mass mobilization refers to the number of mass events orchestrated by citizens, such as protests. The scale was the same, with 0 being none and 4 being many. Next, political violence refers to the act of physical force to achieve political objectives, with the scale also being the same as above.

Then, there is polarization of society, which refers to the extent to which differences of opinion result in major clashes of view or agreement. The scale, however, is switched with this variable: 0 being serious polarization resulting in major clashes of view and 4 being no polarization, there is general agreement. The last variable, national party control, refers to the unification of parties within the national government. The scale ranged from 0–2, with 0 being unified coalition control, 1 being divided party control, and 2 being unified party control. All these variables showed a significant relationship with one another, as shown in the correlation below in Table 3. With these variables, mass mobilization, political violence, polarization of society, and national party control are all control variables. The independent variable is the democracy index and political polarization is the dependent variable.

Table 3. Correlation between Democracy and Other Variables

Variable	Correlation Coefficient
Political Polarization	-.32**
Mass Mobilization	.13
Polarization of Society	.13
Political Violence	-.44**
National Party Control	-.41**

Table 3 shows the relationship between democracy and other numerous factors from a correlation that was run using the SPSS dataset from V-Dem. The table suggests that political polarization, political violence, and national party control all create a significant negative relationship with democracy. However, both mass mobilization and polarization of society create a positive one. These two variables do not show any significance with democracy; however, due to it being greater than .05, it resulted in no asterisks. With this, it can be understood that mass mobilization, political violence, polarization of society, and national party control all influence political polarization. This will be shown in Figures 1–4¹ and will be given more explanations later in the paper.

As mentioned, mass mobilization, political violence, polarization of society, and national party control all influence the dependent variable, political polarization. For example, there is a strong relationship between political polarization and polarization of society ($R^2=0.468$), and a positive relationship between political polarization and political violence ($R^2=0.384$). The relationship with mass mobilization is positive but weaker ($R^2=0.131$). National party control shows a very weak relationship with political polarization ($R^2=0.024$), though it still relates to democracy in correlation analyses.

¹See the appendix.

Table 4. Democracy Index Regressed on a Range of Variables

Coefficients	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
Political Polarization	-.139*	(-.263, -.015)
Mass Mobilization	.262***	(.160, .364)
Political Violence	-.339***	(-.445, -.234)
Polarization of Society	-.119*	(-.237, -.001)
National Party Control	-.194***	(-.276, -.112)
Constant	-.129	(-.269, .010)

With the factor analysis table, correlation, and scatterplot graphs, an OLS multiple regression was run. Table 4² below shows the results of a regression regarding the democracy index, made from the factor analysis, on a range of variables. All variables in this equation are statistically significant except for the constant, known as the democracy index. The table shows that, all else equal, political polarization negatively affects democracies by -.139. Similarly, all other factors being equal, political violence, polarization of society, and national party control also negatively affect democracies. Conversely, mass mobilization positively affects democracies by .262.

Discussion

With my analysis, it is clearly shown that mass mobilization, political violence, polarization of society, and national party control all have some influence on political polarization. By having this influence, the data clearly shows that political polarization is affecting democratic backsliding. This theory can still be developed by explaining how and why, as different political analysts offer varying explanations.

However, here is my take. In a democratic country, the people have a voice. We elect our officials and hope that they do what they say. However, when a political party rises and claims election fraud or in any way delegitimizes its main opponent, trust in our system decreases. Having a decreased level of trust in our government creates political tension, causing violence and mass mobilization within our cities. Political violence and mass mobilization cause citizens to unify their parties to the extreme. All these steps lead to one variable: political polarization. This one variable allows laws to be turned to the parties' favor, causing more divide between the parties. By causing division, also known as the "us versus them" dynamic, democratic backsliding occurs. This is demonstrated by the data presented in the analysis.

With this, my theory that the rise of political polarization can lead to democratic backsliding can very well be the reason that so many political analysts are seeing a decline in democracy. However, many political analysts have different explanations on why democracy is backsliding. Some claim it could be due to technology advancing and economic inequality, while others claim it could be political polarization like I do. However, it is important to figure out why to save our democracies before it is too late. Every year for the past eighteen years, we keep seeing democracies decline, and we must be able to fix this "reverse wave" as Huntington called it before there are none left.

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²F-Test: 24.87*** Number of Cases: 177 R-Squared: .420.

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Appendix

For example, in Figure 1, there is a negative slope within the scatterplot graph between political polarization and polarization of society. However, it is important to note that the reason the scatterplot is negative is due to the dataset numbers being switched. For example, when the V-DEM dataset was completed, the scale for political polarization was 0 being no, 4 being yes, but with polarization of society, the 0 meant yes while the 4 meant no. This is the reason the graph shows a negative slope when it should be positive. With this, the two variables still have an extraordinarily strong, significant relationship with one another. This is demonstrated not only by the slope but also by the R-square of 0.468, which indicates that 47% of the variance in the dependent variable is explained by variation in the independent variables. This shows a positive relationship, not perfect, but it can be clearly noted that as one’s value goes up, so does the other. This also demonstrates that the more polarized a society is then the more polarized they are with their political beliefs.

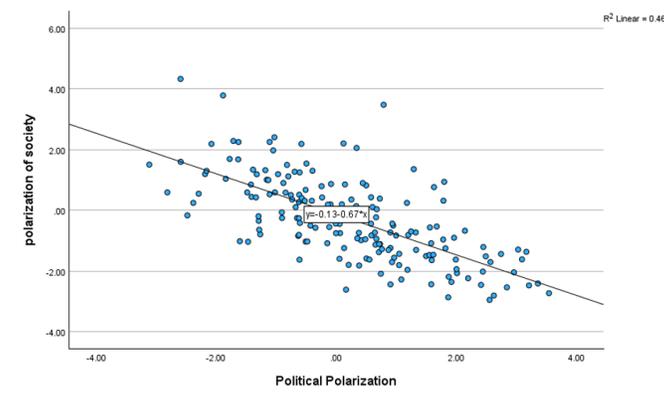


Figure 1. Relationship Between Political Polarization and Polarization of Society

Also shown below, in Figure 2 there is a strong, positive relationship between political polarization and political violence. In the figure, the R-square value shows a 0.384. It is not as high as the one with political polarization and polarization of society, but it still shows a great relationship. The figure also demonstrates that as one’s value goes up, so does the other meaning the slope is positive, so an inference can be made that the relationship is positive. This makes sense because as political violence increases within a country, so do the differing opinions between citizens, known as political polarization.

Figure 3, shown below, demonstrates how mass mobilization influences political polarization in a positive way because the slope is positive. However, the R-square is not as strong as the ones like polarization of society and political violence. For this figure, the R-square value is 0.131. With this, it barely hits 0.1, showing it has a positive, but weak relationship. In other words, as protests and demonstrations go up in society, political polarization will rise, but not as significantly.

Within Figure 4, also shown below, you can see there is barely a slope regarding the relationship between political polarization and national party control. As we have seen with the other variables, the R-square is both on the stronger and weaker sides. However, this figure shows an R-square value of 0.024, meaning these two variables barely have a relationship. You can also see that the line of best fit is barely a slope, so there is no relationship. This means that national party control shows no influence on political polarization, but when put in correlation with the democracy index (Table 3), there is. This goes to show that even though it barely has a relationship with political polarization, there is some effect on it creating democratic backslide.

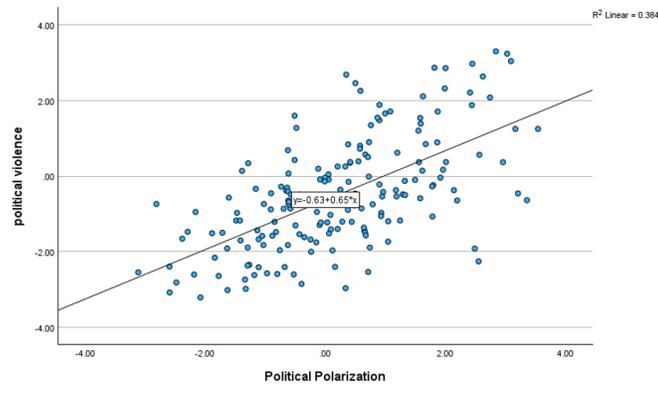


Figure 2. Relationship Between Political Polarization and Political Violence

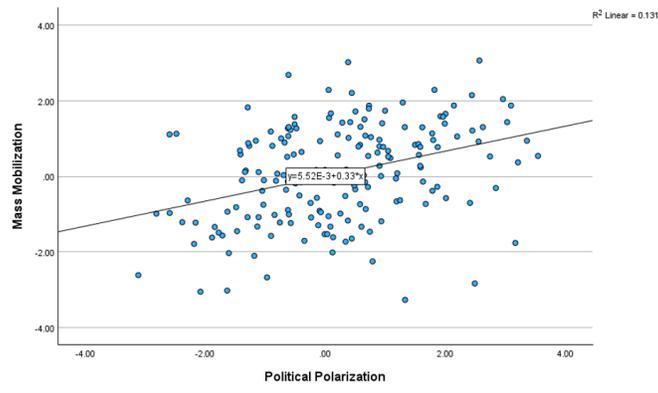


Figure 3. Relationship between Political Polarization and Mass Mobilization

With the data mentioned above, the control variables are there to see if the relationship between the independent variable, democracy, and the dependent variable, political polarization, is caused by something else. However, as seen in the data, these two variables have a relationship with one another, demonstrating that my theory is correct: political polarization leads to democratic backsliding. This is shown below in Figure 5 by the negative slope: as political polarization goes up, democracy goes down.

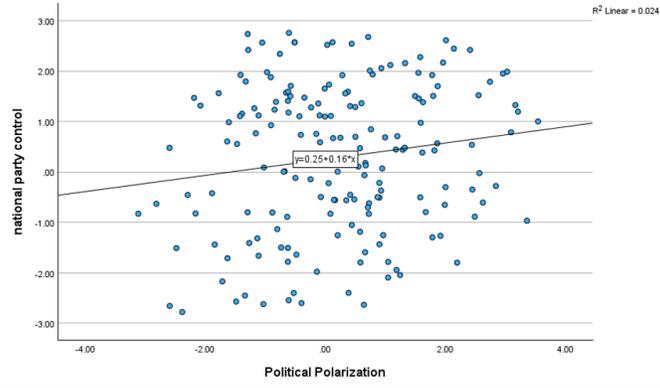


Figure 4. Relationship between Political Polarization and National Party Control

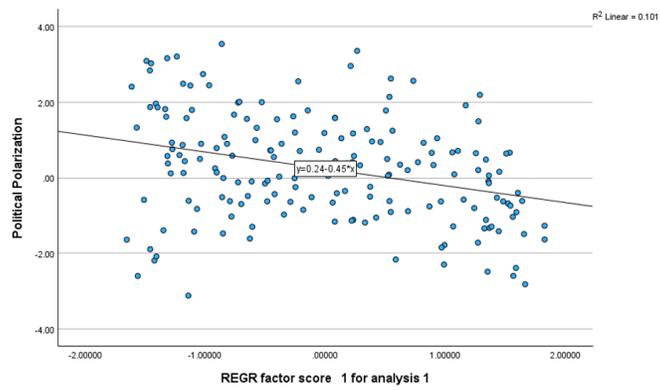


Figure 5. Relationship between Factor Analysis (Democracy) and Political Polarization