

## **Candidate Quality and Voter Response in U.S. House Elections**

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## **ABSTRACT**

We propose and test the implications of a two-dimensional concept of candidate quality in U.S. House elections. Strategic quality is composed of the skills and resources necessary to wage an effective campaign; personal quality is composed of the characteristics most ordinary citizens value in their leaders and representatives, such as personal integrity and dedication to public service. We employ district informants in studies of the 1998 and 2002 congressional elections to measure these qualities in candidates, and we merge mass survey data with the district informant indicators to assess constituents' awareness and evaluation of House candidates, and voting choice. We find that awareness tends to be responsive to candidates' strategic quality, and that incumbent evaluation is remarkably responsive to variation in personal quality, even taking into account the quality of challenger emergence. These and other findings appear to support a more positive view of citizen capacity than is common in the congressional elections literature, especially in light of the electoral security of House incumbents.

Candidate quality occupies a pivotal place in the congressional electoral process. Absent a quality challenge, competition is low, and voters are relatively unengaged and unlikely to stray from supporting the incumbent. The scarcity of quality challengers in House elections who might stimulate competition is a significant problem. The concept of quality applies to incumbents as well as challengers, although the effects of incumbent quality may differ from the effects of quality challengers. Whereas high quality incumbents should suppress competition because they would be difficult to defeat (Herrnson 2004; Mondak 1995; Stone 2004), high quality challengers stimulate competition and enhance levels of voter engagement and information (Gronke 2000; Krasno 1994; Squire 1992).

We investigate the effects of incumbent and challenger quality by reassessing our understanding and measurement of candidate quality, and by exploring the implications of two dimensions of candidate quality on voters' response to congressional campaigns. Our argument is that candidate quality has a strategic dimension composed of the skills and resources the candidate would need to run an effective political campaign, and a personal dimension that reflects the qualities and skills ordinary citizens value in their leaders. One type of citizen response is awareness of the candidates and forming opinions about them. Citizens also respond to candidates by making evaluative judgments in the form of candidate affect, approval of incumbent performance, and voting choice. Citizen engagement and evaluation may vary by whether the candidate is the incumbent or challenger, and by the dimension of candidate quality. Evaluation of incumbents should be especially responsive to personal as compared with strategic quality because incumbents are well known and their personal strengths and weaknesses may be more apparent to voters. In contrast, strategic quality should stimulate engagement because the skills and resources necessary to run a successful campaign define strategic quality. Unlike incumbents, challengers are often not well known, so challenger strategic quality may dominate personal quality in prompting citizen response.

A final concern is with two of the mechanisms that may produce voter response to incumbent quality. One possibility is that voters are sufficiently aware of incumbent qualities to make independent evaluative judgments consistent with variation in incumbent quality. A second is that voters react primarily to challengers, whose entry signals a weakness in incumbent performance or quality, and whose campaigns convey critical information about incumbents to voters. While we cannot fully specify the conditions of each of these mechanisms, our comparatively rich measures of challenger quality increase our control over the challenger-entry hypothesis, which can give us greater confidence that residual evidence of citizen response to incumbent quality is not due to uncontrolled variation in challenger quality.

The question of mechanisms returns us to the importance of reassessing candidate quality to advance our understanding of political representation and the electoral process. If challengers are essential in conveying information to voters about the quality of incumbents, the emergence of strong challengers is all the more critical to the congressional electoral process. If, on the other hand, citizens have the capacity to judge their Representatives independently, our confidence in their ability to enforce the

fundamental conditions of representative government is enhanced. This is true not least because House elections are typically not competitive and the entry of highly qualified challengers is the exception rather than the rule. Thus, evidence that voters are sensitive to incumbent quality independent of challenger entry may increase our confidence in citizen control of the electoral process.

### RETHINKING CANDIDATE QUALITY

Political scientists appear to have in mind two fundamentally different dimensions of candidate quality, although standard approaches to measuring quality do not take these dimensions into account. The first relates directly to whether the candidate has the skills, resources, and attributes necessary to wage a strong campaign. Jacobson and Kernell's path-breaking work on "strategic politicians" emphasized that experienced office holders have a better chance of getting elected because they have the skills and experience that comes from winning elective office (Jacobson and Kernell 1983 30):

Our discussion of the opportunity structure suggests that the quality of candidates can be measured by their prior office-holding experience. The base office itself is an important resource. Intuitively, we assume that people who previously managed to get elected to public office at least once should be more effective campaigners than those who have not.

While scholars have sought to refine the office-holding measure by calibrating the status or electoral value of the highest office held (Green 1988; Krasno 1994; Krasno and Green 1988), there has been no direct investigation of the idea that office-holding experience measures the ability to mount a formidable campaign. Indeed, Peverill Squire sought to improve on the office-holding measure by introducing an explicit measure of campaign skill in his concept of challenger quality (Squire 1992).

Squire's impulse to develop a specific measure of campaign skill implies a perceived ambiguity in the office-holding criterion. Are campaign skills all that are required to win elective office? Ironically it is in the much more limited literature on *incumbent* quality that we find an important extension to the concept of candidate quality in the work of Jeffery Mondak (1995), who culled descriptors of incumbents from the *Almanac of American Politics* to measure incumbents' personal integrity and on-the-job competence. Integrity and competence are qualities that ordinary citizens surely value in their leaders and in those who contend for elective office (Miller 1990). Thus, following Mondak, we suggest that personal quality is a dimension of candidate quality conceptually distinct from the ability to conduct a viable campaign.<sup>1</sup>

Both the strategic and personal dimensions are necessary components to our conception of candidate quality; neither is sufficient. The skills and resources needed to wage an effective campaign are necessary to achieve electoral success, but this dimension

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<sup>1</sup> Mondak did not distinguish between his concept of quality and strategic quality, nor did he explicitly measure the latter.

of quality alone is insufficient for a “quality” candidate. The personal characteristics and qualities that define personal quality are intrinsically desirable in candidates because they contest for positions of political power, which have significant responsibility as agents for their electorates (Mondak 1995). Candidates who only have strategic skills are not of the highest quality because the electorate cannot be certain they will act as faithful agents. Likewise, candidates high in personal qualities who lack the skills necessary to win elections are not high quality candidates because they are unable to get elected.

Drawing the distinction between personal and strategic quality does not mean the two are empirically unrelated—both may contribute directly to the electoral prospects of potential candidates and incumbents (Stone et al. 2006; Stone and Maisel 2003). They should also relate to one another. If voters value the personal qualities of candidates for office, so also should contributors and others who control the resources candidates need to wage an effective campaign. Thus, the strategic quality of fund-raising ability may depend on personal qualities such as integrity, since integrity should improve potential candidates’ ability to attract support from contributors.

### **MEASURING CANDIDATE QUALITY**

We began the Candidate Emergence Study (CES) in the 1998 election cycle, and extended it into 2002 with several important differences in design between the two elections. As a result, different phases of the study afford somewhat different opportunities to study aspects of the questions we have posed. Our basic approach, common to both years of the study, is to measure quality by asking elites and activists in samples of U.S. House districts to assess the quality of the incumbent or challenger on a variety of items designed to capture strategic and personal quality. The premise is that district informants are in a position to assess the qualities of the candidates, although there certainly may be error or bias in the perceptions of any single informant. One obvious source of bias is in whether the partisanship of the informant matches or opposes the party of the incumbent or challenger. We purged items for partisan bias by adjusting individual informant perceptions by partisanship (Stone and Maisel 2003), and then aggregated all responses for an item to the level of the House district.<sup>2</sup> This yields a mean district informant rating of a candidate’s quality on a particular item—for example a mean informant rating of the incumbent’s personal integrity.

### **THE 1998 PHASE OF THE STUDY**

In the 1998 version of the study, we began with samples of national convention delegates and other party activists in a national sample of 198 randomly selected U.S. House districts. This first wave of informant surveys was conducted in the summer of 1997, almost a year and a half before the 1998 elections. In addition to soliciting information about incumbents, one of the purposes of the CES was to ask informants to

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<sup>2</sup> Informant respondents were asked to evaluate candidates on 7-point scales ranging from “Extremely Weak” (-3) through “Fair” (0) to “Extremely Strong” (+3).

identify individuals in their district who would make strong candidates for the House if they were to run. Once the informant surveys were collected, we surveyed the potential candidates they named, as well as state legislators whose districts overlapped substantially with the U.S. House districts in our sample. The potential-candidate surveys were administered 3 to 6 months before the filing deadline in their states. For this paper, we treat all respondents—those in the first survey of district informants as well as named potential candidates and state legislators—as informants because we asked all three samples identical batteries of questions about incumbent quality.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that we identified and surveyed respondents well in advance of the 1998 elections meant that we could not ask them to evaluate the quality of challengers.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in the 1998 study, we have informant-based indicators of incumbent quality only. We originally designed our batteries of questions about the incumbent to tap three potentially distinct dimensions of quality: strategic quality, personal quality, and performance on the job as a Representative in the House. The three items we employ to measure strategic quality asked informants to rate the incumbent's fund-raising ability, name recognition in the district, and support from the incumbent's party outside the district. Six items make up the personal quality index: the incumbent's dedication to serving the public, grasp of the issues, ability to find solutions to problems, public speaking ability, ability to work with other political leaders, and personal integrity. Finally, our survey included four items to measure the incumbent's job performance: legislative accomplishments in the House, ability to bring federal funds to the district, ability to provide constituency services, and ability to stay in touch with the district. We confirmed the dimensional structure of the items using a principal components analysis, which showed that the strategic-quality items formed a distinct dimension from the personal quality and performance items.<sup>5</sup> The latter two dimensions did not emerge as distinct factors, however. As a result, with only one exception in the analysis, we combine the personal-quality and incumbent-performance indexes into a single measure of the personal quality of incumbents in 1998.<sup>6</sup>

In order to assess the impact of incumbent quality (and challenger quality as measured by the standard office-holding dummy) in 1998, we merged the 1998 National Elections Study survey data with the CES district data in the districts where the CES and NES samples overlap. Because the two studies' samples were independently drawn national random samples, the intersection of the two should be random subsets of each

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<sup>3</sup> By combining the three samples of district informants with named potential candidates and state legislators, we have an average of 13.7 respondents per district.

<sup>4</sup> We did ask informants who named strong potential candidates in their districts to evaluate those individuals on many of the same items we used to rate the quality of incumbents. However, since so few named potential candidates ran, the data cannot be used to measure the quality of challengers who actually ran in 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Cronbach's alpha for each of the three indexes is as follows: strategic quality, alpha = .73; personal quality, alpha = .88; performance, alpha = .82.

<sup>6</sup> The strategic quality and overall personal quality indexes are moderately correlated with one another ( $r = .49$ ). As we would expect from the fact that the principal components analysis did not distinguish cleanly between performance and personal quality, the correlation between the six-item personal quality index and the job-performance index is considerably higher ( $r = .79$ ). Alpha for the overall personal quality-performance index is .92.

study's sample. Although this is not a particularly efficient design from the perspective of maximizing the number of cases available for analysis, it should be free of systematic bias. Tables 1a and 1b report comparisons to test for systematic differences related to the intersection of the NES and CES samples. Table 1a splits the NES sample into respondents who were in a district included in the CES sample and those who were not in a CES sample district. Most of the differences on variables of interest to this study, including incumbent and challenger thermometer ratings, mentions in the likes-dislikes battery of questions about House candidates, and candidate recall are within the bounds of random variation. Several, including job approval of the incumbent and percent voting for the incumbent are statistically significant, although the magnitude of the differences are not large. If there is a bias in the CES overlap with the NES sample, it appears that respondents in the CES districts were somewhat less likely than NES respondents not in CES sample districts to recognize and support their incumbent on some items.

[Tables 1a and 1b here]

A plausible explanation for the differences in Table 1a is evident in Table 1b, which shows that CES sample districts that contained NES respondents over-represented open seats by over 100%. Since districts where the incumbent did not run typically see a drop in support for the incumbent party's candidate, that apparently explains the lower levels of vote for and approval of the incumbent. When we re-run the comparisons in Table 1a and eliminate open seats, all differences between the two samples except recognizing the incumbent are insignificant. In addition, Table 1b shows that most of the candidate-quality comparisons between CES districts that include and do not include NES respondents are not statistically significant. While we cannot conclude for certain that there are no important differences between districts and respondents included in the overlap between the two studies and those excluded, it does appear reasonable to proceed, mindful that we must be cautious about generalizing from the overlapping districts.

## **THE 2002 STUDY**

The 2002 study does not serve merely to replicate the 1998 phase, especially since there are several important design differences relevant to this paper. One of our concerns is with extending the two-dimensional concept of candidate quality to challengers, but in 1998 our informant samples were surveyed too far in advance of the campaign to provide information about the candidates who ran in the sample districts. Surveying informants far in advance of the campaign is a significant advantage for many purposes because informant observations are not contaminated by the events of the campaign itself (Stone, Fulton, Maestas and Maisel 2006), but it did not allow us to apply our concept of quality to House challengers since the challengers were not known at the time of the surveys. To address this problem, we included in the 2002 study a campaign-wave survey of

informants, which allowed us to ask informants about the two dimensions of candidate quality for challengers as well as incumbents before the election results were known.<sup>7</sup>

The approach we took with our campaign-wave informants built directly on the experience from the 1998 study. We asked a six-item battery of questions about the Democratic candidate in the district and an identical battery about the Republican candidate, with three questions each devoted to the strategic and personal dimensions of quality.<sup>8</sup> The result of this approach is that we have exactly comparable informant-based measures of incumbent and challenger quality, including a strategic quality index and a personal quality index. The advantage, of course, is that we can compare the effects of both dimensions of quality for challengers as well as incumbents.<sup>9</sup>

A second difference between the 1998 and 2002 phases of the study is that in 2002 we over-sampled districts we expected to be competitive as a supplement to a randomly selected national cross-section of districts.<sup>10</sup> We also were unable to rely upon the NES 2002 study because that year's survey was not focused on congressional elections, and contained relatively few items about U.S. House candidates. Instead, we employ the Exercising Citizenship in American Democracy congressional election study conducted in 2002 by a team of scholars at Indiana University (henceforth, the "IU Study"). As in 1998, we draw upon the overlap between the CES districts and the IU respondents to investigate citizen response to variations in candidate quality.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Care must be taken in how we use these data because informants' evaluations of challengers (and incumbents) reflect campaign events such as levels of spending, press coverage and the like. Thus, these evaluations are endogenous to the entry decisions and investments potential candidates, contributors, party leaders and others make. As noted, an advantage of the approach we took in 1998 (and a comparable advantage of using the office-holding measure of challenger quality) is that quality measures are exogenous to candidate entry. However, our purpose is to assess the impact of candidate quality on voters' responses. For this purpose, the assumption that our measures of candidate quality are exogenous is more plausible. Additionally, we have the 1998 results to compare, and in that phase of the study, measures of incumbent quality are exogenous to the campaign in question.

<sup>8</sup> One consequence of asking about the candidates by party rather than explicitly about the incumbent and challenger was that we did not include a performance battery. The personal-quality items were: personal integrity, dedication to serving the public, and overall strength as a public servant. The strategic-quality index is composed of name recognition, ability raise money, and overall strength as a campaigner. Principle components analysis confirms the distinction between strategic and personal quality; Cronbach's alpha for the strategic quality items is .94; for the personal quality items, alpha = .89.

<sup>9</sup> In 2002, we surveyed an average of 12.1 informants per district.

<sup>10</sup> Our selection of potentially competitive districts in 2002 was done in the late spring of 2001, and depended on pooling estimates by congressional elections experts as to which districts were likely to be competitive. Because 2002 was the first year after reapportionment and redistricting and we contacted our expert panel in advance of redistricting in many states, there was a great deal of uncertainty about which districts would be competitive.

<sup>11</sup> We performed analyses on the overlap between the 2002 CES district sample and the IU survey sample comparable to Tables 1a and 1b. None of our comparisons between CES districts with IU Study respondents and those not represented in the 2002 mass survey was statistically significant, but there were several significant differences between IU Study respondents in CES districts compared with those not included in CES sample districts. Because of the over sample of competitive districts in 2002, challenger visibility was higher among respondents in the overlapping districts and support for the incumbent was significantly lower.



In sum, by drawing upon the 1998 and 2002 phases of the Candidate Emergence Study and the associated mass samples from the 1998 NES and 2002 IU Study, we explore the effects of variation in the personal and strategic quality of incumbents and challengers on citizen engagement in the campaign and candidate evaluation. Our primary hypothesis is that personal quality affects candidate evaluation, while strategic quality stimulates engagement, although we consider it likely that there may be differences between how voters respond to challengers and incumbents. We are also interested in teasing out as best we can whether citizen response depends on the entry of quality challengers, and whether there is evidence consistent with the idea that citizens are capable of perceiving directly variations in candidate quality.

### COMPARING MEASURES OF CHALLENGER QUALITY

Our comparison of the office-holding and informant-based measures of challenger quality in this paper is limited. As noted, the most common approach to measuring challenger quality is to employ an office-holding dummy to indicate whether the challenger has held elective office in the past. Most refinements of this measure have attempted to calibrate differences in the office-holding experience of challengers, as well as incorporating other indicators (such as celebrity status) of challenger visibility (Canon 1990; Green 1988; Jacobson 1989; Lublin 1994; Squire 1992), whereas our approach makes the distinction between the strategic and personal dimensions of candidate quality. Table 2 provides some simple comparisons between the standard office-holding measure and the CES informant ratings of challengers on the strategic and personal indexes, along with quality comparisons between challengers and incumbents.

(Table 2 here)

Notice that the difference between experienced and inexperienced challengers is greatest on strategic quality, where inexperienced challengers were rated negatively on their strategic skills and resources, while challengers who had held elective office were rated positively. Care must be taken in drawing casual inferences since district informants may have been aware of challengers' office-holding experience at the time of our survey, but multivariate analysis (not shown) suggests that office-holding experience is better "explained" by strategic than by personal quality.<sup>12</sup> These results suggest that office-holding experience may be a better measure of strategic than of personal quality.

While we do not attempt a full comparison of the informant-based measures of challenger quality from the 2002 CES with the standard office-holding measure, we do incorporate the experience dummy into much of the analysis along with our measures of strategic and personal quality as a way of testing for value-added from the informant measures.

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<sup>12</sup> A logit analysis of the office-holding dummy shows that strategic quality has a strong and significant effect, while personal quality does not have a statistically significant independent effect on challenger office-holding experience.

## VOTER RESPONSE TO CANDIDATE QUALITY

### ENGAGEMENT

We begin with an analysis of voter engagement in response to candidate quality, since some degree of engagement is necessary for citizens to form an evaluative judgment about a candidate. Our expectation is that strategic quality is more directly relevant to citizen engagement than personal quality because a primary function of campaigns is to mobilize citizens, and candidates with more strategic skills should be better able to run effective campaigns. We present the 1998 and 2002 results separately because we use different items on the two surveys to measure engagement. In both years' studies, however, the questions we have in mind are identical: how aware of candidates respondents were and how willing they were to express an opinion about the candidate.

As we would expect from previous studies (cf. Gronke 2000; Krasno 1994), levels of candidate recognition are substantially higher for incumbents than for challengers, a pattern that is replicated in our data (68% recognized the incumbent in the 1998 NES; 46% said they recognized the challenger). A second measure of awareness of the candidate is the willingness to express likes or dislikes of the candidate, and on this measure incumbents are almost twice as likely as challengers to prompt respondents express an opinion about something they like or dislike (44% vs. 24%).

Throughout the multivariate analysis our dependent variables (engagement, evaluation, voting choice) relate to the incumbent if the member of Congress is running for reelection or, if the incumbent stepped down or was defeated in a primary, the candidate running in the former incumbent's party. This allows us to observe "incumbency effects" with an open-seat dummy, since open seats are districts where the incumbent party's candidate is running for the first time, but it does involve including a small number of cases in open seats in which the "incumbent" is not the current Representative running for reelection.

Our approach is to include a variety of individual characteristics that are associated with engagement by citizens in the electoral process, including strength of party identification, education, general knowledge about politics, whether the respondent was contacted by a party or candidate during the campaign, and ideological proximity to the incumbent.<sup>13</sup> As additional controls, we include several variables that describe the incumbent and the race in the district that may affect citizen engagement, including the seniority and party of the incumbent, whether the seat was open, and, in the case of dependent variables measuring awareness of the incumbent, whether there was a

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<sup>13</sup> We measure ideological proximity to the incumbent by computing the absolute difference between the respondent's self-identified position on a seven-point liberal-conservative scale and the mean informant placement of incumbents on the same 7-point scale. Including contact is a conservative measure on our part because contact may result from vigorous House campaigns and the candidate qualities behind them. However, the contact measures do not indicate whether it came from a House campaign, so we include it as a precaution.

challenger. Finally, we include measures of incumbent and challenger quality. In the 1998 analysis our only measure of challenger quality is the office-holding-experience dummy; in the 2002 analysis, we have identical measures of incumbent and challenger strategic and personal quality.

Table 3 presents the analysis of citizen engagement from the 1998 study. A variety of individual and district or contextual factors are significant in explaining citizen engagement as we have measured it. Strength of party identification has a significant effect on challenger recognition, number of mentioned likes and dislikes about the challenger, whereas education affects both incumbent and challenger. The most consistently significant individual variable is general knowledge about politics, which has a strong and significant effect in all four models. Somewhat more sporadically than the individual controls, various aspects of the electoral environment in the district also can affect citizen engagement.

(Table 3 here)

Two findings stand out with respect to candidate quality. First, experienced challengers stimulate greater levels of recognition and more comments about challengers, compared with districts in which the challenger did not have prior office-holding experience. This finding is consistent with the literature on challenger quality effects in congressional elections (Gronke 2000; Jacobson 2004; Krasno 1994; Squire 1992). In addition, of course, we include our informant-based measures of incumbent strategic and personal quality. As expected, incumbent strategic quality appears to stimulate recognition of the incumbent and more expressions of likes and dislikes. The independent effect of variation in incumbent strategic quality can be quite pronounced. For example, *ceteris paribus*, the gain in the probability of recognizing the incumbent rated highest in strategic quality (+3.0) compared with the Representative judged to be the lowest on this dimension of quality (+1.25) is approximately .40. This suggests a strong effect on the visibility and awareness of incumbents associated with their strategic resources and skills. In contrast, there is no evidence that incumbent personal quality affects citizen engagement, nor is there any effect of either dimension of incumbent quality on expressions of likes and dislikes about or the visibility of the challenger.

As noted, a significant advantage of the 2002 study is that we have comparable measures of strategic and personal quality for challengers as well as incumbents, but the IU Study did not include a likes-dislikes battery of questions. Our measure of engagement is based upon three trait questions that were asked of respondents about the Democratic and Republican House candidates in the district. We count at least one “don’t know” response to the three-item trait battery as indicating a lack of awareness of the candidate. By this measure, 45% of the sample was unable to rate the incumbent and 50% was unable to rate the challenger. One possible problem with the measure is that there is relatively little differentiation between incumbent and challenger awareness, compared with the 1998 NES study. Otherwise, the analysis closely parallels Table 3, with the exception of the additional measures of challenger quality.

(Table 4 here)

The results are partially consistent with those from 1998 and with the expected effects of strategic quality on citizen engagement. The effect of incumbent strategic quality on awareness of the incumbent misses standard significance thresholds ( $p = .117$ ), but the impact of *challenger* strategic quality on ability to rate incumbents is marginally significant ( $p = .069$ ). While it is plausible that challenger strategic quality elevates incumbent visibility by virtue of the more vigorous campaigns such challengers conduct, the absence of a significant incumbent-quality effect, even when we drop the challenger-quality measures from the analysis, is not consistent with expectations.

The challenger awareness results, in contrast, are consistent with our expectations. Both incumbent and challenger strategic quality have positive effects on challenger awareness. Notice that the standard office-holding measure of challenger quality has no effect on respondents' willingness to rate challengers, in sharp contrast to the results from the 1998 study, which do not include the informant-based measures of challenger quality.<sup>14</sup>

We have strong evidence from the 1998 study that incumbent strategic quality boosts awareness of the incumbent, with somewhat weaker and less consistent results from 2002, at least as they pertain to awareness of incumbents. The fact that strategic quality seems to increase engagement, while personal quality has no effect is preliminary support for differentiating between the two dimensions of candidate quality, although more confident conclusions in this regard depend on our analysis of quality on candidate evaluation and voting choice.

## CANDIDATE EVALUATION AND VOTING CHOICE

Table 5 presents our initial analysis of candidate evaluation in 1998 with regressions of incumbent thermometer and voting choice on individual and district/incumbent control variables, as well as our measures of candidate quality in that year's study. The individual controls include party identification (coded to reflect the party of the incumbent), ideological proximity to the incumbent, and approval of Congress.<sup>15</sup> District and incumbent controls, as in the engagement analysis, include whether there was a challenger, incumbent seniority and party, and whether the seat was open.

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<sup>14</sup> Although the effect of challenger office-holding experience just misses standard levels of significance when we remove the informant-based measures of challenger quality from the analysis. We do not have an airtight explanation for the apparently negative effect of incumbent personal quality on challenger awareness. We can only speculate that incumbent personal quality deters strong challengers in a way that is not fully registered by our measures of challenger quality.

<sup>15</sup> The expected sign for ideological proximity is negative, since the closer the respondent is to the ideological position of the incumbent, the higher should be the thermometer rating or probability of voting for the incumbent. We include congressional job approval for two reasons: it is a surrogate for party identification (coded from Democrat to Republican, rather than by the party of the incumbent) and because it is strongly related to approval of the incumbent, which is one of our evaluation measures.

(Table 5 here)

The results of the incumbent thermometer regression provide striking confirmation of the notion that incumbent personal quality affects voters' evaluations of their representatives. The net independent effect of observed variation among incumbents on the personal-quality scale rivals the impact on voters' evaluations. The impact of the seat being open (of the incumbent not running) is a loss of 13.8 degrees in the average incumbent-party candidate's ratings, compared with districts where the incumbent ran for reelection. This is a substantial "incumbency effect," consistent with prior work demonstrating that the incumbent's party suffers a loss of support when the incumbent departs. However, the effect of variation in the quality of incumbents who *do* run for reelection is also substantial. Comparing the lowest quality incumbent with the highest quality incumbent running for reelection in our sample indicates just over a 12-point difference in thermometer evaluation. This effect rivals in magnitude the impact of incumbency reflected in the open-seat dummy and is strong evidence that it is not just whether the incumbent runs or not that matters. The quality of the incumbent running also can make a great deal of difference.

Incumbent personal quality also affects voting choice, meeting the one-tailed standard of statistical significance. Ours is not the first study to report an effect of incumbent personal quality on thermometer rating and voting choice (McCurley and Mondak 1995), but we are the first to examine its effects in the context of a larger analysis of candidate quality that contrasts the effects of personal and strategic quality. The absence of strategic-quality effects in Table 5 combined with the personal-quality results reflect the differential impact of the two dimensions of candidate quality on voters' response.

Of course, the more substantive inference to be drawn from Table 5 is that voters appear to be responding directly to the personal quality of their Representatives when they are asked to express their affect toward the incumbent, and when they cast their votes. More accurately, voters are *not* merely or primarily responding to the visibility and fundraising prowess of the incumbent in their affective judgments or in their voting choice. Whereas we have shown that constituents' awareness and engagement is responsive to the strategic side of incumbent quality, affect and voting choice reflect the substance of the incumbent's personal quality and job performance.

By including the traditional office-holding measure of challenger quality in the equation, we attempt to control for the emergence of strong challengers as a possible mechanism for producing constituents' response to variation in incumbent personal quality. We know that incumbents high in personal quality are less likely to attract a strong challenge (Mondak 1995; Stone, Maisel, Maestas 2004), so that an effect of incumbent quality on evaluation or voting choice in the absence of a control for the strength of the challenger could reflect the strength of the challenge as much as that of the incumbent. In other words, voters might like incumbents who do not face experienced challengers because weaker challengers are unable to marshal the visibility and credibility necessary to alert voters to incumbents' weaknesses. Likewise, voters may be

less likely to like and vote for incumbents who receive a strong challenge because in those races the challenger makes a more visible and credible case against the incumbent. If the mechanism for citizen response to variations in incumbent quality were strong challenger emergence, it would still be true that high quality incumbents are rewarded with greater electoral support and lower quality incumbents risk defeat, but we could not conclude that voters are necessarily aware of incumbent quality or take it into account in assessing their Representatives. The presence of quality effects in Table 5 even with the control for challenger quality provides preliminary support that strong challenger emergence is not the only mechanism that produces constituents' response to incumbent personal quality.

We have a third measure of incumbent evaluation from the 1998 NES survey—incumbent job approval—that provides us with additional leverage on the question of constituents' awareness of incumbent quality.<sup>16</sup> Recall that our measure of incumbent personal quality combines a battery of questions put to informants about the personal characteristics of the incumbent (integrity, dedication, etc.) and a second battery asking about the job performance of the incumbent (attentiveness to the constituency, legislative accomplishments, etc.). Thus far, we have combined the two measures into a single indicator of incumbent overall personal quality because the personal-characteristics and job-performance batteries are strongly correlated. In Table 6, Equation 1, we report an analysis of incumbent approval in 1998 based on exactly the same model as in the thermometer and vote-choice equations in Table 5, which employs the overall measure of incumbent personal quality. As in Table 5, the overall personal quality of incumbents as captured by the two batteries of informant items affects job approval independent of strategic quality and experienced-challenger entry. Thus far, then, we have replicated the personal-quality effects seen in Table 5.

(Table 6 here)

In Equation 2, Table 6, we separate the personal character and job-performance indexes. Despite the strong correlation between these two components of our overall measure of incumbent personal quality, the job-performance index has a significant positive effect on constituents' assessments of their Representative's performance in Congress, while strategic and personal-character measures of incumbent quality are insignificant.<sup>17</sup> We see this as rather strong evidence that voters assess incumbent job performance directly, independent of the strength of the challenger. We do not claim that the average constituent is sitting in the House gallery or regularly reading *Congressional Quarterly* or *Roll Call* to glean information about her Representative. Rather, our results suggest that constituents have a pretty good idea of the quality of their incumbent House member, probably from a number of sources including the challenger, media coverage,

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<sup>16</sup> The question put to respondents in the NES survey was: "In general, do you approve or disapprove of the way Representative [Name] has been handling his/her job?" Respondents who expressed approval or disapproval were then prompted for the strength of their assessment, which results in a four-point scale.

<sup>17</sup> If we drop informants' rating of incumbents' job performance from the analysis, personal character is strongly significant (strategic quality remains insignificant).

elite opinion, and the social networks from which they gather political information (Beck et al. 2002; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995; Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

Table 7 replicates and extends the analysis from 1998 by including measures of challenger personal and strategic quality in equations predicting incumbent approval and voting choice. The incumbent-approval analysis shows once again that incumbent personal quality affects job approval of House incumbents, with no effects of incumbent strategic quality or either dimension of quality for challengers.<sup>18</sup> The primary benefit of this analysis is to provide additional assurance that the effects of incumbent personal quality we have seen are not mediated by the emergence of strong challengers, since the 2002 analysis includes both the office-experience dummy and the two informant-based measures of challenger quality.

(Table 7 here)

The voting-choice analysis confirms the two-dimensional nature of candidate quality, and suggests the limitations of the standard measure of challenger quality. Several conclusions seem warranted. First, incumbent personal quality is once again strongly significant in affecting voting choice. *Ceteris paribus*, incumbents of high personal quality are rewarded with the votes of their constituents; those of lesser quality are punished by the loss of their constituents' support.

A second conclusion from the voting-choice results reflects the apparent differences in the effects of challenger and incumbent quality. In keeping with our expectation that personal quality affects evaluation, voting choice is influenced by variation in incumbent personal quality, while incumbent strategic quality has no independent effect. In contrast, challenger strategic quality dominates voting choice over challenger personal quality. This result is consistent with the idea that challengers have a visibility barrier that must be overcome before their candidacy can plausibly challenge an incumbent, and that their strategic resources and skills are the key to their ability to attract votes because this side of their quality determines challengers' visibility. In contrast, incumbents are relatively well known and most voters are in a much better position to judge them on their merits. Indeed, the results in Tables 6 and 7 demonstrate that incumbents' merits are very much a factor in constituents' judgments of them.

A final point from the analysis in Table 7 can be made by referring to Figure 1, which shows the surprisingly close symmetry between the positive effect of incumbent personal quality on the probability of voters' voting for them and the negative effect of challenger strategic quality on the probability of voting for the incumbent. The difference in the probability of voting for the incumbent, all else equal, between the lowest and highest quality challengers is over .4, with the difference in effect of

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<sup>18</sup> The absence of a significant effect of party identification in Equation 1 is odd, and reflects the fact that there is only a weak bivariate correlation between party identification (coded to reflect the party of the incumbent) and incumbent job approval ( $r = .095$ ), which washes out completely in the multivariate analysis. This contrasts with the stronger bivariate correlation in 1998 ( $r = .236$ ), which retains a significant effect in the multivariate analysis in Table 6.

incumbent personal quality somewhat less owing to the lower range of observed variation in incumbent quality.<sup>19</sup> Of course, the fact that the *effects* of challenger and incumbent quality are symmetric does not mean that most races are competitive or that the average challenger is the incumbent's match in quality on either dimension. The average challenger is rated only .02 on the 7-point strategic quality scale compared with the average incumbent rating of 2.08 in strategic quality, while the average incumbent is rated at 1.50 in personal quality compared with the average challenger's personal quality rating of .99. And, as we would anticipate, when the average incumbent faces off against the average challenger, the probability of voting for the incumbent is decidedly in the incumbent's favor. Nonetheless, the analysis shows that in the unusual case of an incumbent who is poor in personal quality voters respond by withholding their votes, while votes can be won by a strong challenger with the ability to mount an effective campaign who emerges against an incumbent.

(Figure 1 here)

## CONCLUSION

By investigating two dimensions of candidate quality in the 1998 and 2002 elections, we have found that voters respond to the quality of both the incumbent and the challenger. Citizen engagement appears to be most responsive to strategic quality, while evaluation tends to reflect personal quality. These effects are reasonably consistent between the 1998 and 2002 phases of the study, and they hold up with controls for quality challenger emergence, which suggests that challenger entry is not the only mechanism that accounts for citizens' response to variations in incumbent quality.

Congressional scholars have often assumed that constituents' absence of information about incumbent House members and challengers on sample surveys has direct implications for the quality of the judgments they make about the candidates in congressional elections, and their capacity as citizens. As Stokes and Miller (Stokes and Miller 1962 541) put it in their foundational study, "In the main, recognition carries a positive valence; to be perceived at all is to be perceived favorably." The paucity of information in the electorate about House candidates compared with presidential candidates led a generation of scholars following Stokes and Miller to assume that voters in congressional elections are inert, that they are subject to manipulation by incumbents who command enormous advantages over actual and potential challengers, and that, as a consequence, the ability of voters to enforce some measure of control over their representatives.

In addition to encouraging an exaggerated view of voter ignorance in congressional elections, the value of visibility has been taken by subsequent scholars as

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<sup>19</sup> Whereas challenger strategic quality varies between -3 and +2.9 in the sample, incumbent personal quality ranges from -1.4 to +3. Because we plot incumbent and challenger quality together, the curves in Figure 1, especially at the low end of incumbent quality, extrapolate somewhat beyond the observed levels of quality in the sample.



the primary explanation for the advantage incumbents enjoy over challengers. In and of itself, this is not necessarily a problem, since incumbents do enjoy a visibility advantage over challengers, which helps explain their electoral success. However, underneath this visibility advantage there is substantial variation in incumbent quality that is completely lost to view when we limit our analysis to a dummy variable for whether the seat is open, and assume that adequately captures the relevant variance in candidate quality in the incumbent's party. Incumbents are evaluated more positively than their successor candidates from their party, to be sure. But there are also important differences among incumbents running for reelection. High quality incumbents running for reelection are evaluated more positively and are more likely to attract votes than their colleagues who are lower in quality. These results provide a foundation at the micro level for aggregate results showing that incumbent quality affects the vote share they capture on Election Day (Mondak 1995; Stone, Fulton, Maestas, Maisel 2006).

We have no doubt, had we queried 1998 and 2002 respondents in depth about their knowledge of the challenger and incumbent in their House races, that their levels of information would not have been high. At the same time, however, such apparent ignorance by the average constituent does not incapacitate him or her from making substantive judgments about the quality of House candidates. Indeed, the quality of response we have seen by citizens to variation in incumbent quality is both striking and reassuring. By whatever mechanism—whether by social networks, decision heuristics, opinion leadership, or on-line processing, to name a few of the more prominent possibilities—citizens manage to equip themselves to enforce the rudiments of the electoral bargain with their representatives in Congress. These findings contribute to a more positive view of incumbents' advantages because they suggest those advantages depend on performance and quality, *and* that when incumbents fall short they suffer the electoral consequences.

The payoffs associated with rethinking candidate quality and incorporating a more complete understanding into our measures of quality may be substantial. It is only with a fuller understanding of the stimulus to which voters respond that their votes, evaluations, and levels of awareness can be fully understood. The problem with many of the classic studies was that they took survey respondents as free-standing actors on whose shoulders the democratic bargain between leaders and representatives directly and fully rested. However, a full understanding of how voters think and act requires that we include the electoral context presented to them in campaigns in our analysis. In congressional elections, a crucial element of that context is the quality, skill, and performance of the candidates vying for voters' attention and support. When candidate quality is fully incorporated into analysis of citizen response, the picture that emerges is of an average voter who is a good deal more capable of reaching reasonable judgments about her representatives than would be expected by assessing her information levels alone.

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**Table 1a.** Comparison of 1998 NES Respondents from CES Sample Districts with those from Districts Not in CES Sample

Variable	Not in CES Sample District	In CES Sample District	<i>p</i>
Mean incumbent thermometer	60.70	59.60	.500
Mean challenger thermometer	54.51	52.86	.434
Mean incumbent likes+dislikes	1.20	1.05	.089
Mean challenger likes+dislikes	1.03	1.03	.580
Percent recall incumbent	30.7	32.5	.494
Percent recall challenger	19.9	20.4	.817
Percent recognize incumbent	76.4	67.8	.001
Percent recognize challenger	30.6	38.7	.002
Percent voted Republican	54.2	50.0	.323
Percent voted incumbent	74.7	66.7	.038
<i>N</i>	(618)	(661)	

**Table 1b.** Comparison of CES Variables by whether Districts Contain NES Respondents

Variable	CES Districts without NES Respondents	CES Districts with NES Respondents	<i>p</i>
Mean incumbent personal quality rating	1.12	1.28	.040
Mean incumbent performance rating	.85	.94	.305
Mean incumbent strategic quality rating	2.23	2.24	.866
Mean incumbent personal quality and performance	.98	1.11	.107
Percent open	4.4	9.7	.198
Percent no challenger	22.8	21.0	.774
Percent experienced challenger	22.1	32.3	.126
Mean incumbent vote share	69.96	70.74	.731
<i>N</i>	(136)	(62)	

*Note:* *p* values for mean differences computed by *t* – test; for percent difference by chi square.

**Table 2.** Challenger and Incumbent Personal and Strategic Quality Comparisons, 2002.

	Challenger Has Office-Holding Experience?		Difference
	No	Yes	
<i>Challenger:</i>			
Strategic quality	-.89	.62	1.51
Personal quality	.58	1.38	.80
Combined quality	-.20	1.00	1.20
<i>Incumbent advantage</i>			
Strategic quality	+2.90	+1.43	-1.60
Personal quality	+.77	+.14	-.63
Combined quality	+1.86	+.79	-1.07
<i>N</i>	(105)	(26)	

**Table 3.** Effects of Candidate Quality on Recognition and Number of Likes and Dislikes of Incumbents and Challengers, 1998

	Incumbent Recognition		Challenger Recognition		Incumbent Mentions		Challenger Mentions	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
<i>Candidate Quality:</i>								
Incumbent strategic quality	1.257***	.464	.393	.708	.506**	.225	-.392	.703
Incumbent personal quality	-.434	.439	.057	.322	.145	.218	.346	.514
Experienced challenger	-.318	.542	1.653***	.463	-.210	.218	1.634***	.436
<i>Individual Controls:</i>								
Strength of party identification	.159	.113	.219**	.104	.091	.064	.262**	.120
Education	-.044	.097	-.037	.075	.108**	.054	.150**	.073
General political knowledge	.371***	.075	.208***	.068	.233***	.033	.236**	.100
Contact from party or candidate	.933***	.230	.114	.294	.398***	.149	.524**	.255
Ideological proximity to incumbent	.022	.129	.074	.095	.035	.055	-.024	.068
<i>District Context:</i>								
No challenger	-1.801***	.570	--	--	-.236	.340	--	--
Incumbent seniority	.091*	.053	.036	.059	-.013	.034	.074	.065
Democratic incumbent	-.188	.519	-.291	.386	-.020	.215	-.946*	.491
Open seat	-.711	.571	1.014	.962	-.255	.230	.254	.372
Governor race in state	1.154**	.484	.655	.518	.180	.333	.779	.574
Senate race in state	-.714*	.418	.396	.485	-.106	.224	.448	.517
Constant	3.020**	1.437	-4.457***	1.543	-2.773***	.879	-4.820***	1.761
Log pseudo-likelihood	-247.190		-235.119		-733.209		-369.815	
<i>N</i>	515		417		515		417	

*NOTE:* Recognition results estimated with logit regression, mentions estimated with negative binomial regression; robust standard errors clustering on district.

‘\*\*\*’  $p < .01$ ; ‘\*\*’  $p < .05$ ; ‘\*’  $p < .10$ ; two-tailed tests.

**Table 4.** Effects of Candidate Quality on Incumbent and Challenger Recognition, 2002

	Incumbent Awareness		Challenger Awareness	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
<i>Candidate Quality:</i>				
Incumbent strategic quality	.432	.263	.757**	.334
Incumbent personal quality	-.109	.240	-.390*	.233
Challenger strategic quality	.334*	.185	.498**	.219
Challenger personal quality	.138	.195	-.084	.208
Experienced challenger	-.351	.397	.131	.416
<i>Individual Controls:</i>				
Strength of party identification	.419***	.136	.435***	.142
Education	.198	.174	.219	.155
General political knowledge	.219**	.089	.182**	.083
Contact from party or candidate	1.345***	.262	1.197***	.269
Ideological proximity to incumbent	-.071	.095	.030	.093
<i>District Context:</i>				
No challenger	.913**	.432	--	--
Incumbent seniority	.044	.040	-.002	.046
Democratic incumbent	-.027	.293	.086	.289
Open seat	.019	.381	.177	.376
Governor race in state	.444	.427	.180	.403
Senate race in state	-.011	.280	.022	.292
Constant	-3.266***	.854	-3.588***	.862
Log pseudo-likelihood	-188.014		-181.771	
<i>N</i>	370		338	

*NOTE:* Logit regression estimates; robust standard errors clustering on district.

‘\*\*\*’  $p < .01$ ; ‘\*\*’  $p < .05$ ; ‘\*’  $p < .10$ ; two-tailed tests.

**TABLE 5: Incumbent Thermometer Rating and Voting Choice, 1998**

	Incumbent Thermometer		Vote Choice	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
<i>Candidate Quality:</i>				
Incumbent strategic quality	4.674	3.491	-.741	.912
Incumbent personal quality	6.001***	2.042	1.682*	.877
Experienced challenger	3.235	1.996	-.498	.554
<i>Individual Controls:</i>				
Party identification	4.760***	.469	.727***	.136
Ideol. proximity to incumbent	-4.313**	2.061	.416	.454
Congress job approval	1.018	.732	.050	.134
<i>District Context:</i>				
No challenger	1.732	3.602	.072	1.503
Incumbent seniority	-.382	.239	-.074	.063
Democratic incumbent	3.193	2.635	-.325	.893
Open seat	-13.751***	3.793	-.937*	.543
Constant	31.811***	7.699	-.788	1.927
R <sup>2</sup> (Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> )	.224		(.330)	
Log pseudo-likelihood			-117.362	
<i>N</i>	445		275	

*NOTE:* Thermometer results estimated with OLS regression, vote choice estimated with logit regression; robust standard errors clustering on district.

‘\*\*\*’  $p < .01$ ; ‘\*\*’  $p < .05$ ; ‘\*’  $p < .10$ ; two-tailed tests.



**Table 6.** Effects of Incumbent Quality on Incumbent Job Approval, 1998

	(1)		(2)	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
<i>Candidate Quality</i>				
Experienced challenger	-.121	.328	-.162	.310
Incumbent strategic quality	.064	.302	.037	.301
Incumbent overall pers. quality	.610***	.179	--	--
Incumbent personal character	--	--	-.122	.338
Incumbent job performance	--	--	.759**	.382
<i>Individual Controls</i>				
Party identification	.204***	.044	.202***	.044
Ideol. proximity to incumbent	-.104	.239	-.130	.234
Congress job approval	.153***	.057	.155***	.056
<i>District Context</i>				
No challenger	-.416*	.227	-.524**	.242
Incumbent seniority	-.072***	.018	-.087***	.024
Democratic incumbent	.434**	.209	.426**	.203
Open seat	-1.548***	.486	-1.427***	.428
Log pseudo-likelihood	-837.459		-836.596	
<i>N</i>	656		656	

*Note:* Ordered logit estimation; robust standard errors clustering on district.  
 ‘\*\*\*’  $p < .01$ ; ‘\*\*’  $p < .05$ ; ‘\*’  $p < .10$ ; two-tailed tests.

**Table 7.** Analysis of Incumbent Approval and Voting Choice, 2002

	Incumbent Approval		Voting Choice	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
<i>Candidate Quality</i>				
Experienced challenger	.183	.204	.254	.320
Challenger personal quality	.018	.102	.208	.196
Challenger strategic quality	-.045	.071	-.440***	.137
Incumbent personal quality	.326**	.128	.737***	.268
Incumbent strategic quality	.059	.109	-.080	.413
<i>Individual Controls</i>				
Party identification	.068	.058	.523***	.010
Ideological proximity to incumbent	-.082	.064	-.248*	.127
Congress job approval	.546***	.112	-.018	.132
<i>District Context</i>				
Incumbent seniority	-.044	.030	.025	.060
Democratic incumbent	.053	.191	.150	.281
Open seat	-.194	.271	-.133	.264
Constant			-.425	.866
Log pseudo-likelihood	-702.302		-116.912	
<i>N</i>	431		237	

*NOTE:* Incumbent approval analysis based on ordered logit; voting choice based on logit. We report robust standard errors clustering on district. '\*\*\*'  $p < .01$ ; '\*\*'  $p < .05$ ; '\*'  $p < .10$ ; two-tailed tests.

**Figure 1.**

