

2010 CONGRESSIONAL ELECTION STUDY

Report to Respondents

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The purpose of the 2010 Congressional Election Study is to increase scholarly understanding of how voters respond to the choices they face in congressional elections. Ultimately, our question is how well the electoral process produces representation in the world's oldest democracy. Elections to the U.S. House of Representatives are a good place to conduct this sort of investigation because there is tremendous variation nationwide in the political and social makeup of House districts. As a result, there is also variation in the individuals selected in the 2008 elections to represent their constituents in Washington, and in the candidates who will oppose them in the 2010 elections.

In order to understand the districts, the candidates, and the campaigns they will wage in 2010, we have selected a national sample of 155 U.S. House districts that are the focus of the study. This sample is designed to provide a representative cross-section of all House districts, as well as information about districts that are likely to be especially competitive in 2010.

The study has two key elements built into the design: First, a survey of especially well informed district experts; and second, a survey of registered voters in the same sample of 155 districts. The district-expert aspect of the study involves identifying individuals who are keen observers of politics in their localities. The first phase of the district-expert study was conducted in the summer of 2009 in order to collect baseline information about the experts themselves, their House districts, and the incumbent Representative from their district. The second phase of the study will involve re-contacting these same expert respondents during the 2010 campaign to collect their observations about the candidates and campaigns being run in their districts. The purpose of this report is to summarize results from Phase I of the district-expert study.

Characteristics of District Experts

For our survey of district experts, we contacted delegates to the 2008 Democratic and Republican national conventions who live in our sample districts. We reasoned that individuals interested, skilled, and active enough to be selected as delegates to their party's national convention would be highly attentive and informed about the politics of their area, including the 2010 congressional elections. We contacted an equal number of Democratic and Republican delegates, and received

responses from just over 30% of those contacted in both parties. We have an average of 8 district experts in each of our sample districts.

The results in Table 1 indicate that respondents follow politics and public affairs closely, that they were active in their local congressional races in the 2008 elections, and that they were confident of their answers on our survey. These results demonstrate high levels of information and engagement in public affairs. For example, rates of voting and activism in the general public are much lower than was true of our respondents. Among ordinary citizens, for instance, less than five percent volunteer in a campaign, compared with over 80% of respondents to our survey. Likewise, Americans as a whole are much less attentive than our district experts to news media about politics and public affairs.

Table 1. Summary of Experts' Political Engagement, Activism, and Confidence

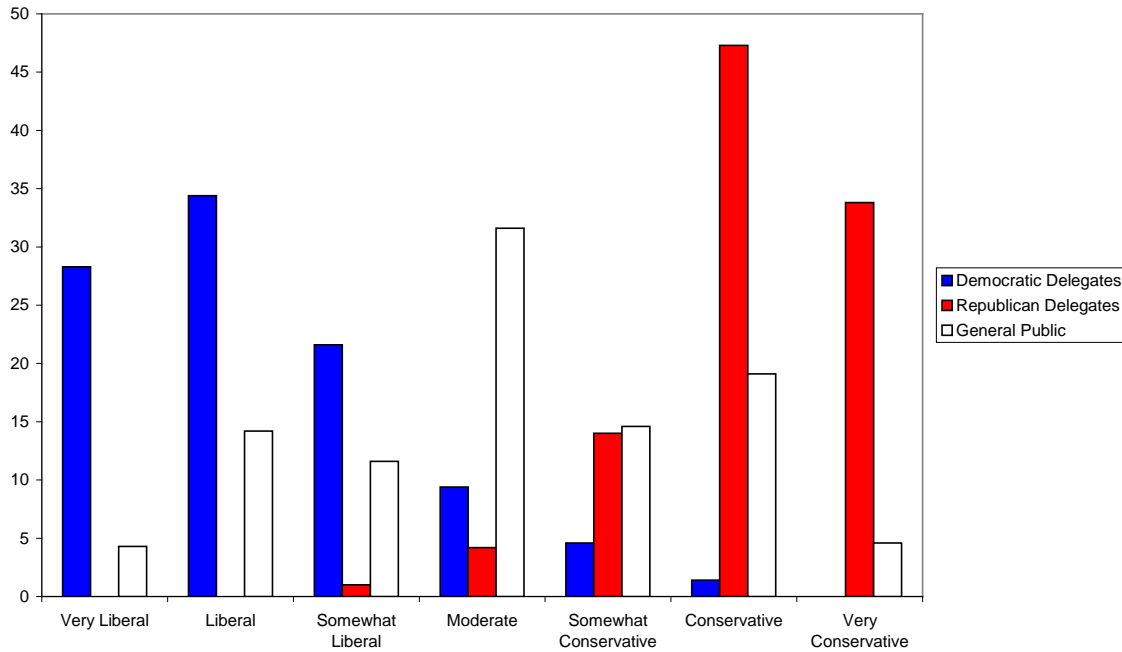
	Percent
<i>Attentiveness to public affairs</i>	
Watch TV news every day	62.8
Read a newspaper every day	64.5
Consult an Internet source every day	58.5
<i>Activity in 2008 House campaigns in district</i>	
Voted	96.1
Persuaded someone else to vote	84.5
Attended a meeting or rally in the campaign	84.2
Worked in a campaign	83.7
<i>Self-assessments of information</i>	
Highly confident of answers on survey	87.7
Certain about accuracy of answers on survey	72.1
Well informed about politics and public affairs	93.8

Source: 2009 Phase of 2010 Congressional Election Study survey of district experts, University of California, Davis.

As we would expect of national convention delegates in the two parties, our respondents are not used to sitting on the political sidelines. In both their commitment to their party and in their political philosophy, they differ from the general public. Fully 94% of respondents strongly identify with their political party, whereas only 34% of the general public strongly identifies with a party. As Figure 1 shows, district experts also diverge rather clearly in their overall political philosophy, with Democrats identifying themselves as predominantly liberal, and Republicans indentifying as conservative.

In short, our expert respondents are different from ordinary Americans in that they are more active and engaged in politics, more attentive to sources of information about politics, and are, as a result, better informed. At the same time, they are more committed to their party and to their political philosophy, which is to be expected among those who are so active in politics. Delegates may be more liberal or conservative than the average American, but they have no difficulty recognizing that they are not typical in this respect, and that ordinary Americans are less committed to their philosophical views.

Figure 1. Political Philosophy of General Public and Democratic and Republican Expert Respondents



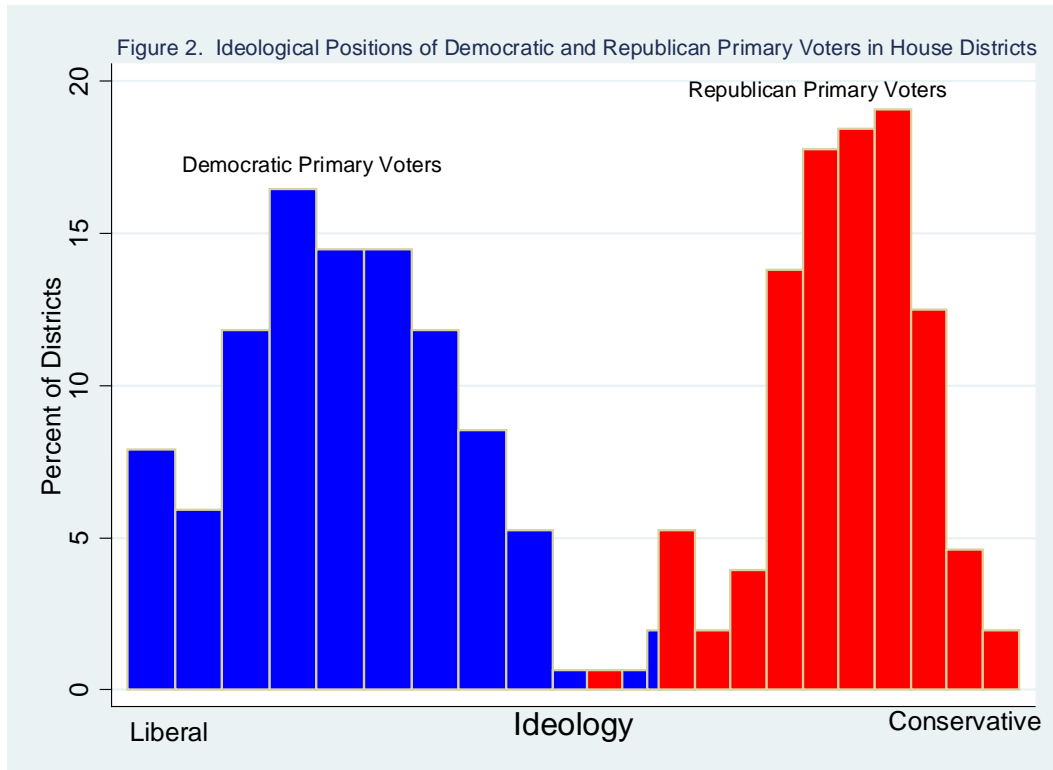
Sources: 2009 Phase of 2010 Congressional Election Study survey of district experts, University of California, Davis; 2008 American National Election Study.

Political and Economic Conditions in the Districts

Experts characterized the average district as slightly more Democratic than Republican in its partisan makeup, while at the same time seeing opinion in districts as slightly on the conservative side of moderate. Both characterizations are confirmed by other data on House districts in the U.S. It is also interesting that 55% of Democratic delegates live in districts that are dominated by Democrats, while exactly the same percentage of Republican delegates live in districts dominated by Republicans. This, too, comports with other things that we know about the geography of partisanship in the U.S. People, including convention delegates, tend to live close to others with similar political views, so that areas with lots of Democratic voters also are home to more Democratic convention delegates, and Republican areas produce more Republican delegates.

While district experts recognized that the average House district was moderately conservative in its ideological makeup, respondents also saw substantial differences both within and between districts. Some districts were seen as quite liberal; others as relatively conservative. Not surprisingly, districts seen as liberal were also dominated by Democrats, whereas the partisan makeup of conservative districts was Republican. At the same time, expert respondents saw the same philosophical differences within districts that observers have commented on as dominating national politics for some time (see Figure 2). That is, Democratic primary voters in districts were judged as being predominantly liberal, while Republican primary voters were rated as quite conservative. Thus, our expert respondents see a mirror image of the national polarization between the parties (and, for that matter, between Democratic and Republican national convention delegates) between partisan constituents within their own districts. Indeed, one

purpose of our study is to investigate the district sources of partisan polarization in Congress, and Figure 2 provides an important clue about one source.



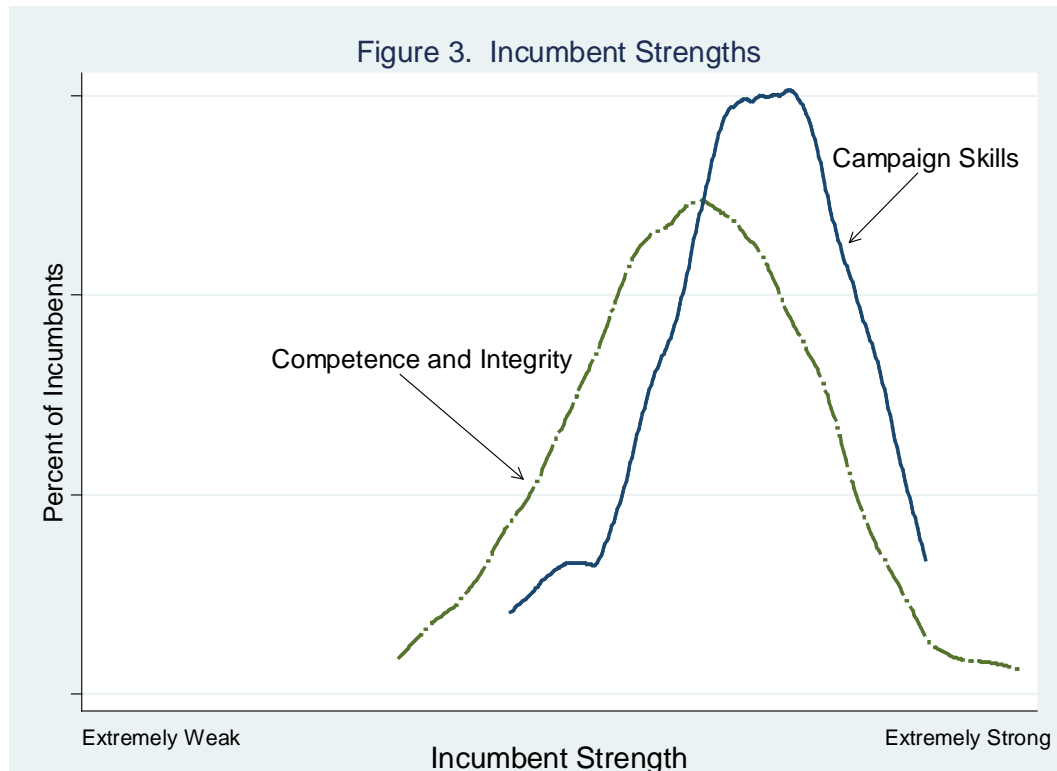
Source: 2009 Phase of 2010 Congressional Election Study survey of district experts, University of California, Davis.

We also asked experts to characterize the economic situation in their districts, among other attributes and characteristics of their districts. While the national economy was in a pronounced slump in the summer of 2009 when we conducted Phase I of the study, districts varied substantially in how they experienced the downturn. For example, while about 30-35% of experts said their districts were about average in family incomes, home foreclosures, and unemployment rates, about a quarter of delegates were in districts doing worse than average and somewhat larger proportions were in districts doing better than the national average. It will be important to understand how local as well as national economic conditions affect the 2010 elections.

Incumbent Electoral Prospects, Skills, and Qualities

Incumbent members of the House of Representatives are difficult to defeat when they run for reelection, a fact well appreciated by expert respondents. The vast majority of respondents are in districts where they judge the incumbent's chances of winning his or her party's nomination as strong, and 76% see their incumbent as likely to win the general election. Expert respondents also believe that most incumbents will run for reelection in 2010. Finally, relatively few are in districts where they judge the incumbent likely to face a strong challenger: less than 10% see a strong challenger emerging against the incumbent in a primary, while about 30% anticipate a strong general-election challenger.

The reasons for high incumbent reelection rates are complex. Two possible explanations are that incumbents have more resources and better campaign skills than the average candidate; a second possibility is that they have skills and characteristics that voters value. In short, incumbents may win reelection because they are good at campaigning or because they have the qualities of competence and integrity that voters appreciate in their representatives. Figure 3 shows the ratings given to incumbents on each of these dimensions. Campaign skills include fundraising ability, the ability to manage a campaign, attract support, and the incumbent's visibility in the district; competence and integrity refer to qualities such as the ability to find solutions to problems, work well with other leaders, personal integrity, job performance, and qualifications to hold public office.



Source: 2009 Phase of 2010 Congressional Election Study survey of district experts, University of California, Davis.

The striking result in Figure 3 is that incumbents are rated quite positively both for their campaign skills, and for their qualities of competence and integrity as office holders. To be sure, incumbents are rated more strongly for the competence as campaigners than they are as office holders, but the generally positive ratings on both indicators suggest important reasons why incumbents win reelection at such high rates. First, they are effective and skilled on the campaign trail. They have high levels of visibility in their districts and they know how to raise the money necessary to wage an effective campaign. Holding a seat in the House of Representatives indicates a high level of political success in the American political system, so it is not surprising that those who attain that success have the skills and resources necessary to hold on to their seats.

However, according to our expert respondents, members of the House of Representatives are not only impressive for their prowess on the campaign trail. While the competence and integrity ratings are somewhat lower than the campaign skills scores, they are nonetheless still in positive

territory. This is perhaps even more surprising when it is realized that roughly half of the experts evaluating their incumbents are rating office-holders from the opposite party. We statistically adjust the scores to remove the effects of partisan bias,¹ but there is no doubt that members of the House are highly regarded for their competence and integrity in doing their jobs by experts in both political parties. This suggests that the electoral process selects not only the candidates best able to make themselves known and liked by their constituents, but also for candidates who are qualified to undertake the responsibilities of their high office.

Conclusion

We are most grateful to the participants in our study who took the time to respond to our survey. The information we have gathered will be invaluable in understanding the 2010 elections, which promise to be of historic importance. If you have questions about the study consult the study website or contact us by email.

¹ The adjustment corrects both for the tendency of partisans in the opposite party to rate incumbents lower and the corresponding tendency for same-party experts to inflate their incumbent ratings.