

2010 CONGRESSIONAL ELECTION STUDY

Report to Respondents on Phase II February, 2011

Walter J. Stone, Director
University of California, Davis

Project Website: <http://electionstudy.ucdavis.edu/>

I would like to thank the thousands of individuals who took the time to respond to our surveys during the course of the 2010 Congressional Election Study. Without their willingness to participate by sharing their expert observations, and opinions, this study would not have been possible. I would also like to thank the National Science Foundation and the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Davis, for their generous support of this project.

The data collection for the project is now complete and we are beginning the process of analyzing our results and presenting them to scholarly and other interested audiences. This analysis and interpretation will take years to complete, and will involve other scholars interested in how elections work in the United States. Of course, we will never release the identity of any respondent; the data will only be used to provide statistical summaries, some of which I present in this report.

We have produced scholarly papers from the 2006 study, which was conducted in a similar way to the 2010 study in the same national sample of U.S. House districts. Those interested in learning more about this project may wish to consult these papers, some of which are posted on the project website. From time to time as we produce papers and other publications, they too will be available on the study website.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

In both the 2006 and 2010 studies, we contacted expert observers in the sample districts and asked them to report on the district, the incumbent Representative, the candidates running in the election, and on the conduct of the campaign itself. We utilize district observers' responses to our surveys to measure the behavior of candidates, their skills and traits, and the positions they take on the issues. This information helps us understand the choices voters faced in the election and how the campaigns were conducted.

We conducted the study in a random sample of 100 U.S. House districts selected from the 48 contiguous states, plus an additional 55 districts selected because they were expected to be competitive in the 2006 elections. Because an important purpose of the study is to examine processes of change in these elections, we continued the study in the same districts through the 2010 elections.

The 2010 study included a baseline survey conducted in the summer of 2009, followed by a campaign phase executed during October, 2010. Phase II of the study also included intensive surveys of constituents residing in the sample districts. This report summarizes some of our preliminary results, focusing primarily on data collected during the 2010 House campaigns. An earlier report on Phase I of the study reports on data collected from our observers in the summer of 2009, prior to the beginning of the mid-term election season.

PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

The goal of the study is to increase our understanding of how elections work. There is tremendous variation in congressional elections, from districts in which Democrats dominate to ones where Republicans are firmly in the majority; from tightly fought races to elections with little or no opposition.

In asking how well elections work, we suggest that voters have two fundamental interests when they choose between candidates competing for high office: they want to advance policies they believe are in their own interests and/or in the national interest; and they want to select the highest quality candidates who have the skills, personal characteristics, and leadership traits necessary to be entrusted with the office. The study of how well the electoral process advances citizen's interests in good policy and in high quality leaders is necessarily complex. This report summarizes some of our early findings from 2010 to illustrate how we address the problem. For more complete analyses, the intrepid reader can turn to the scholarly papers and other publications from this project.

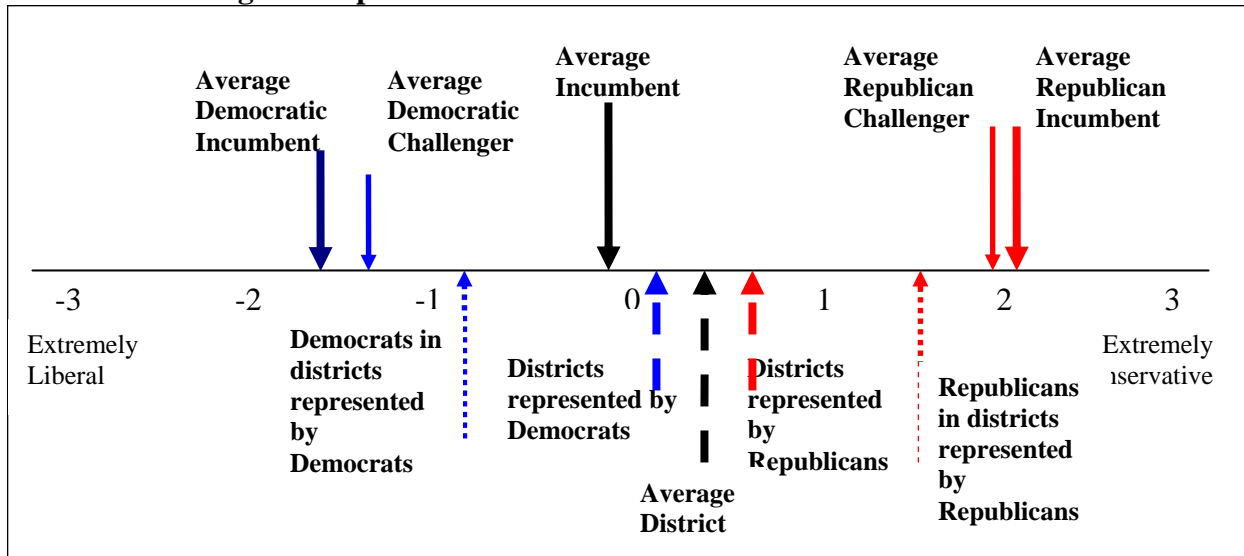
Policy Representation in 2010

One way to address the question of representation is by thinking about policy issues as related to a liberal-conservative dimension. Not all policy disputes or positions fit the liberal-conservative framework, but many do, so it is a useful device for making an otherwise complex problem manageable. It is also true that much (but by no means all) of the conflict over policy issues relates to partisan differences between Republicans and Democrats.

Figure 1 uses expert observer data to locate House candidates (incumbents and challengers) in the two parties on a 7-point liberal-conservative scale, ranging from "extremely liberal" (-3) to "extremely conservative" (+3). Candidates are placed above the line according to the average placement by district expert observers. Placements of districts and partisans within the districts are below the line and are based on a survey of constituents in the districts included in our study. While there is a great deal of variation in where candidates and districts are located across our

sample, these average placements summarize how candidates, parties, and districts differ. The placements are based on the makeup of the 111th Congress *before* the 2010 elections.

FIGURE 1. Ideological Map before 2010 Elections



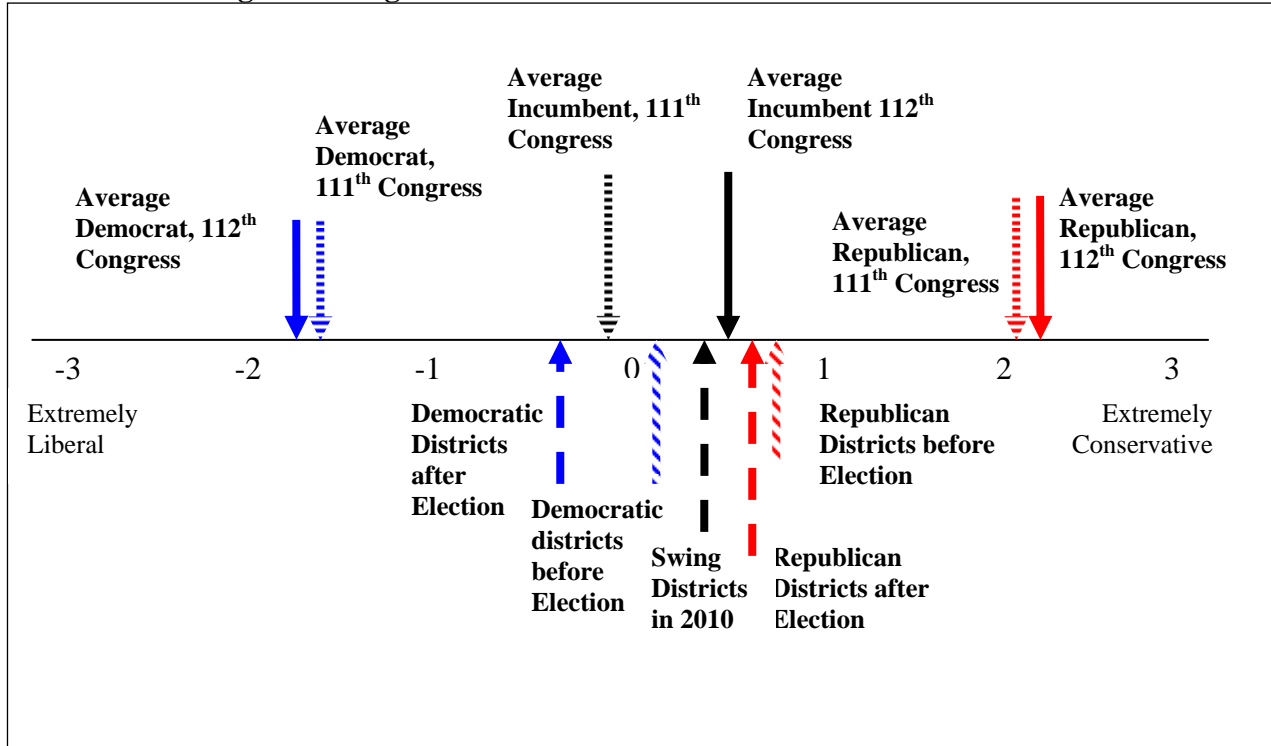
Source: 2010 Congressional Election Study, UC Davis

While the average incumbent in the House of Representative is just to the left of the center of the scale, members of Congress are quite polarized by party. Democratic incumbents are liberal and Republican members of the House are conservative. It is also true that these partisan differences are evident but slightly muted among candidates who ran against incumbents in their districts (“challengers”), and that party differences are even more muted between represented by Democrats and those represented by Republicans. Note that majority partisans within districts (Democrats in Democratic-held districts; Republicans in districts represented by Republicans) are polarized almost as much as candidates from the two parties.

The 2010 elections amounted to an historic victory for the Republicans, who won 63 seats. They went from the minority party holding 41% of seats in the 111th Congress, to the majority party with 56% of seats as a result of the 2010 elections. The change in partisan control of the House is important because it meant that the leadership of the chamber, including every standing committee and subcommittee chair, changed from being controlled by the Democrats to the Republicans. The last time party control of the House changed was in 2006; the time before that was in 1994. Changes in party control are relatively rare and can have far-reaching historical consequences.

Because our data allow us to place candidates and districts on the same liberal-conservative scale, we can observe how much the change in parties affected the ideological makeup of districts and representatives in our sample. Figure 2 shows that the average Representative in the 112th Congress was more conservative than the average member in the 111th Congress – no surprise given the conservative positions taken by most Republican candidates. The overall shift in the ideological makeup of the House was a little over half a point on the 7-point liberal-conservative scale. The shift to the right in the House reflects the 63 gain in seats by the Republicans (with a corresponding loss for the Democrats).

FIGURE 2. Ideological Change as a Result of the 2010 Elections



Source: 2010 Congressional Election Study, UC Davis

The underlying shifts in the parties and the districts they represent as a result of the 2010 elections illustrate an important pattern of representation in a two-party system where the major parties are polarized. Consider the Democrats, who lost seats. The average Democrat in the House became slightly more liberal after the election. The cause is rooted in the “swing” districts the Democrats lost in the elections (denoted by the dashed black arrow below the line). These districts were moderately conservative in their preferences, which meant that the Democrats who represented them were more moderate than their colleagues who won reelection. The exit of these relatively moderate Democrats means that the Democrats remaining in the House are more liberal. Note that the average district represented by Democrats in the new Congress is also more liberal. That is because the relatively conservative swing districts are now removed from the mix of districts represented by Democrats, leaving a more liberal average Democratic district than before the elections.

What happened on the Republican side? Look first at the Republican-held districts below the line. Of course, the moderately conservative swing districts lost by the Democrats in the elections were won by Republicans. Adding them to the base of Republican districts held before the 2010 elections moved the average Republican district to the *left*, away from the Republican Party in the House. Somewhat at odds with what we might expect, the Republican Party in the House moved not toward the center where the swing districts are, but actually in a slightly more conservative direction. The reason for this rightward move by the Republicans after the election is the fact that Republican challengers who won in 2010 were more conservative than incumbent Republicans *and* considerably more conservative than Republican challengers who lost.

In sum, the effect on the Democratic Party of losing so many seats in the election in 2010 was to make the party more liberal, both in its makeup in the House and in the complexion of the districts represented. The average Republican-held district was more moderate after the 2010 elections because the swing districts were moderate, but the party in Congress held fast to its conservative position.

What can we conclude about policy representation in Congress? It appears from the figure that the parties in Congress are slightly more polarized after the election than they were before the election. The Republican takeover in the House means that the House is noticeably more conservative in its policy predispositions. In fact, *every Republican member of Congress in our sample is more conservative than the position of the swing districts that produced the GOP majority in 2010.*

Of course, the Congress as a whole is more than the majority party, which is why the average incumbent in the House is a moderate centrist (see Figure 1). It will behoove Speaker John Boehner and the rest of the Republican leadership in the House to keep in mind that the swing districts that put them in the majority are substantially more moderate than the Republican Party. The fact that the Republican Party actually moved slightly to the right as a result of the new members' positions must worry the Republican leadership,¹ because districts that swing in one direction in an election can swing in the opposite direction in a subsequent election. Indeed, something like this is exactly what undid the Democratic majority of the last four years. The moderate preferences of the 2010 swing districts may compel the GOP to compromise with their Democratic colleagues in the House, with the Democratic majority in the Senate and with President Obama as they confront the nation's policy problems over the next two years.²

Candidate Quality and the Election

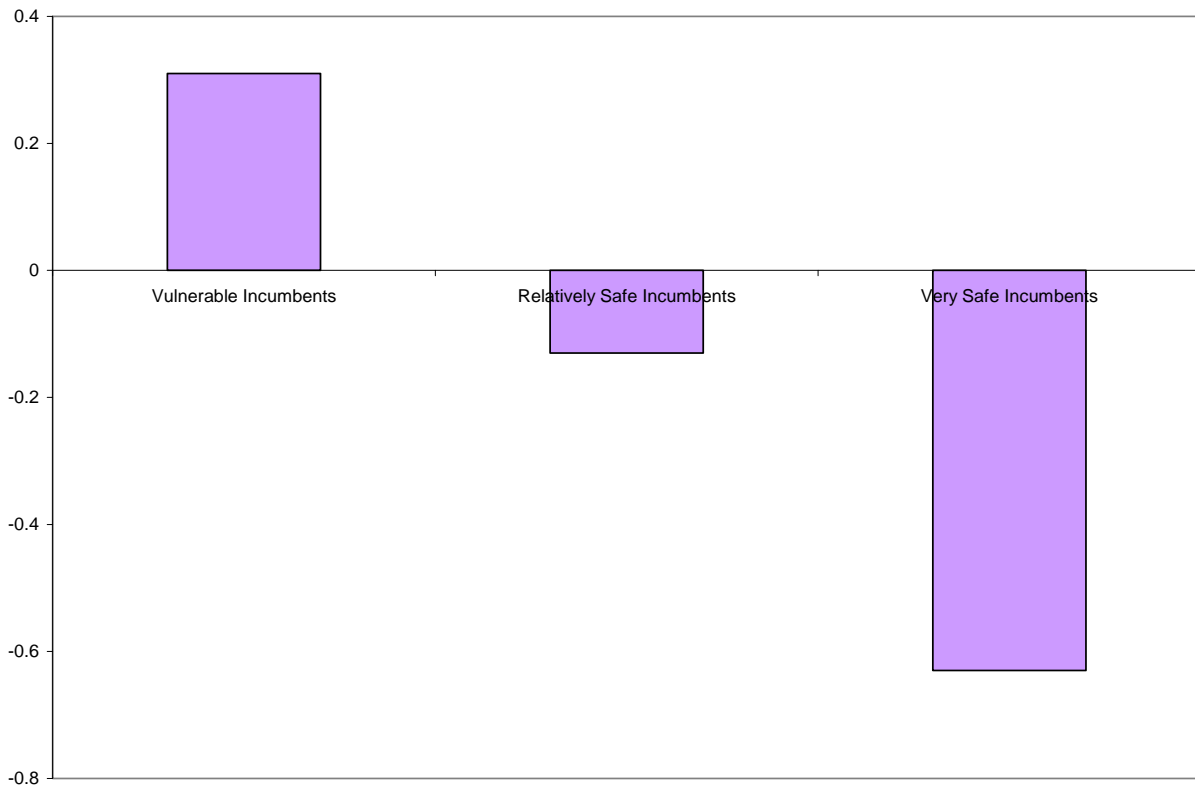
In addition to policy consequences of elections, a second aspect of representation is the quality of the candidates who run and win. We asked district expert observers a battery of questions designed to measure the skills, qualities, and resources of the candidates running in their districts. Some of these questions assessed the candidates' ability to wage an effective campaign by raising the necessary funds, organizing the campaign, and attracting sufficient attention. Because winning election is necessary to hold office, having the resources and skills necessary to mount a successful campaign is one mark of a high-quality candidate.

¹ One potential explanation for the conservative freshman class in the GOP is the Tea Party movement, a possibility we will explore in depth.

² In important respects, the change wrought by the 2006 elections, which ended 12 years of Republican control over Congress and brought the Democratic Party to the majority under Speaker Nancy Pelosi, had very similar consequences in reverse. As a result of the Democratic victory in 2006, the average Democratic district moved to the right because the Democrats picked up moderately conservative swing districts. Pelosi's dilemma, then, was to strike a balance between the liberal preferences of her caucus, while not putting at electoral risk the members of her party from those swing districts. Boehner's dilemma, if anything, is more difficult than Pelosi's because the Democratic caucus moved slightly toward the center as a result of the 2006 elections. The newly elected Democrats in that election were moderately liberal, in contrast to the conservative newcomers to the Republican Party conference in 2010 who are much more conservative than the swing districts that elected them.

In phase I of the study, we asked expert observers to estimate the incumbent’s chances of getting reelected in their district. In phase II of the study, during the campaign itself, we asked our expert respondents to report their judgments of each candidate’s skills at campaigning along with the resources they had at their disposal (such as financial reserves and visibility in the district). We combine these ratings into a single campaign skills index, summarized in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3. Campaign Skills and Resources of Challengers by Incumbent Vulnerability in 2010



Source: 2010 Congressional Election Study, UC Davis.

The results in Figure 3 show that skilled challengers with the resources necessary to wage a visible campaign tend to run in districts where the incumbent is most vulnerable. In districts where the incumbent is very likely to win reelection, skilled challengers do not enter the race, leaving the field to candidates who are usually unable to attract significant resources or support. This is an indication that challengers are *strategic* about when they decide to run. When individuals who would make strong congressional candidates in their districts think they have a good chance to win, they run. When they are less likely to win (because the incumbent is safe), these highly skilled potential candidates for Congress do not run. Instead, they pursue other career alternatives—political or nonpolitical—rather than run in a futile race. When strong candidates sit out the election, less skilled candidates with fewer resources step in to run, but they cannot get much traction and their campaigns flounder.

It is important to see that the vulnerability of the incumbent, measured by our district observer reports in the summer of 2009 well *before* the election season began, is a cause of the quality of

the challenger candidate, rather than a consequence of the quality of the challenge. This is something that is often missed by people watching congressional elections, who conclude from the fact that many challengers do not raise much money or wage effective campaigns that the system is rigged in favor of incumbents. While incumbents have important advantages, it is too simple to conclude that weak challengers cause incumbents to be safe. Rather, incumbents who are safe deter strong challengers from running, which results in weak challenges; when an incumbent is vulnerable to defeat, experienced, skillful, and visible challengers emerge to run.

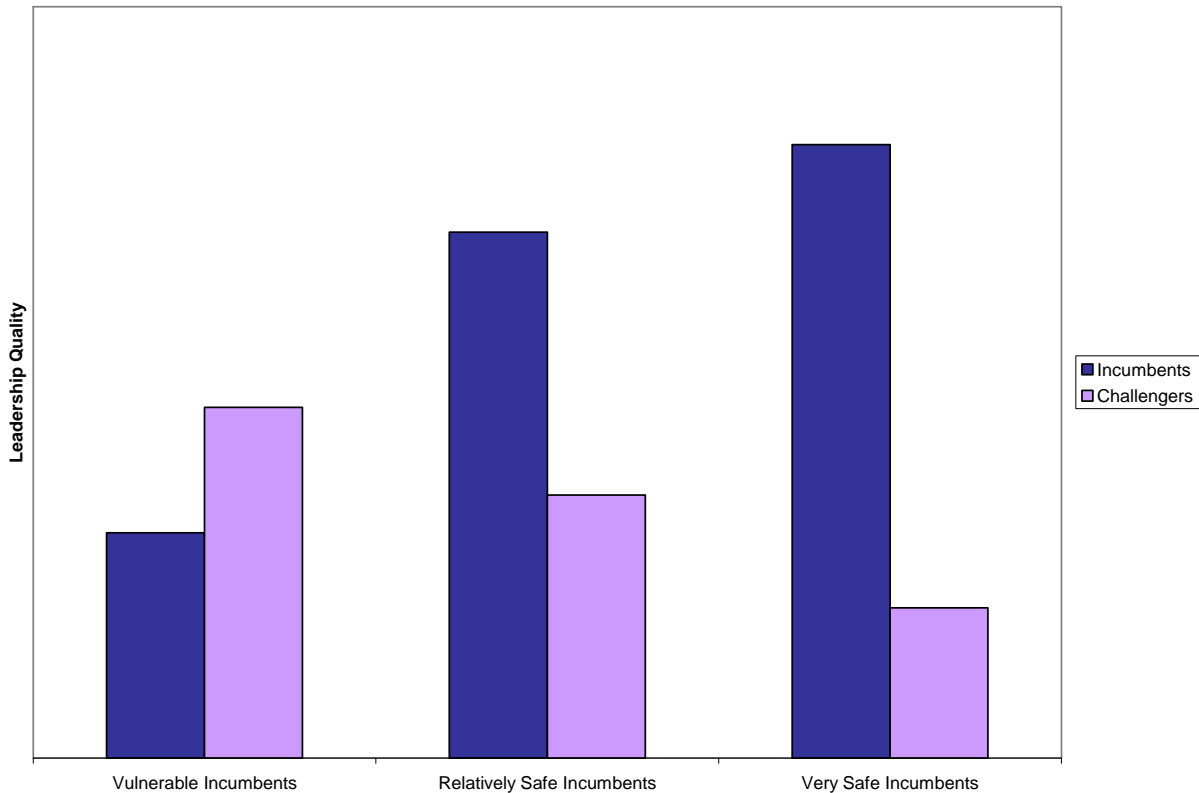
Not all of the factors that affect an incumbent's electoral prospects are related to the district he or she represents. For instance, most observers expected 2010 to be a year in which Republican candidates would experience a tide that would lift their chances, which meant that the national political climate hurt Democrats' chances. Potential challengers and incumbents were aware of the coming national tide, and acted accordingly. When a party is disadvantaged, incumbents in that party are more likely to retire rather than face uncertain electoral prospects, and the party expected to benefit from the tide tends to attract stronger challengers, larger financial donations, and a more energized partisan base. In 2010, Republican challengers as a whole were stronger than Democratic challengers because of the national tide that favored their party; in 2006 the pattern was reversed because in that year the political climate favored the Democrats.

The leadership skills and qualities such as the ability to solve problems, personal integrity, and a good grasp of issues are traits that constituents value intrinsically in leaders selected for high office. All of us, regardless of our party or political ideology, would rather have elected leaders of high personal character and professional competence than scoundrels who are inept at national policy making in Congress. If the electoral process is working as it should, office holders who are incompetent and/or corrupt are dismissed from office; candidates with these negative qualities should not be nominated, and if they are nominated, they should not be elected. A question of fundamental interest to us, therefore, is whether candidates of high personal quality and professional competence, as distinct from those with the qualities and resources that enable them to run an effective campaign, tend to win and hold public office over candidates who are less qualified as leaders.

Figure 4 presents candidates' ratings on leadership qualities like integrity and competence that voters value intrinsically in their elected representatives. The ratings are presented by the same classification of districts as in Figure 3, from districts in which the incumbent was rated most vulnerable to defeat in 2010 through districts where the incumbent's chances for reelection were secure.³

³ A potential problem with ratings of candidates' personal integrity and competence is that they are subject to partisan bias, such that Democratic expert observers rate Democratic candidates higher than they rate Republican candidates, and Republican observers rate Republicans higher than they rate Democrats. Because this is a very regular pattern in our results, we statistically adjust observers' ratings to remove the effect of this bias.

FIGURE 4. Leadership Qualities of Incumbents and Challengers in 2010 by Vulnerability of Incumbent.



Source: 2010 Congressional Election Study, UC Davis.

Several things are noteworthy about the data in Figure 4. First, notice that the leadership quality of challenger candidates declines as the incumbent’s chances of winning reelection improve, consistent with what we observed in Figure 3. Just as was true of the campaign skills and resources in Figure 3, the tendency of potential candidates to be strategic about the races they decide to enter means that better candidates run when their chances of winning are good, while weaker candidates fill the vacuum left when strong potential challengers decide not to run. In Figure 4, candidates who ran against safe incumbents were still positively evaluated in their personal leadership qualifications (in contrast to the negative rating they received for their ability to attract resources and run a strong campaign in Figure 3), but they were nonetheless judged by expert observers in their districts to be weaker leaders than the challengers who ran against vulnerable incumbents.

A second finding in Figure 4 is that the leadership quality of challengers in districts where the incumbent was vulnerable to defeat was higher than that of the incumbents. This suggests two possible conclusions: incumbents may be vulnerable because they are relatively weak in the qualities voters value in elected office holders; and incumbents who are weak in their leadership ability are likely to attract challengers who are strong. Since vulnerable incumbents, in fact, were more likely to lose the election, this supports the idea that elections select candidates with stronger leadership qualities than their opponents.

The increase in leadership quality among incumbents as their electoral safety increases also suggests that incumbents may be rewarded for being well qualified for their jobs. Several earlier studies have found that incumbents with reputations for strong leadership qualities are less likely to be challenged by experienced and skilled candidates because everyone, strong potential challengers included, values incumbents with these qualities. Highly competent incumbents are also likely to attract electoral support, since voters reward incumbents who are honest in their dealings and doing a good job.

The question of whether “better” candidates (whether because of their leadership skills or because of their campaign skills, or both) tend to win is complex. Answering it requires much more analysis than presented here. Nonetheless, it is fair to suggest that the electoral process works better than many critical observers seem to conclude. Many critics infer from the high reelection rates of incumbent members of Congress that the system is badly broken, that candidates win office because they can raise lots of money lavished on them by lobbyists, and that long-term office holders fall prey to Potomac fever and should be summarily booted from office, or prohibited from running for reelection.

The truth is that high reelection rates (in some recent elections 98% of House incumbents who ran won reelection) do not tell us anything for certain about how well or poorly the electoral process works. It could be that incumbents win reelection at high rates because they manipulate the voters, grab all the money, and intimidate their opponents. On the other hand, high reelection rates *should* occur if incumbents are doing the job their constituents hired them to do. If incumbents are generally of high quality, as our study suggests they are, and if their prospects for winning reelection are tied to their leadership quality, as our study indicates is also true, high reelection rates do not necessarily mean that American democracy is badly broken.

Although answering the kinds of questions posed in this report is difficult, our study is making progress by increasing our systematic understanding of processes of representation in the world’s oldest democracy. The data we have collected suggest that the news is not all good, but it certainly is not all bad, either. If elections do not work perfectly, neither are they sham events whose only purpose is to further the narrow ambitions of politicians against the public interest.