

# Incumbency Advantage in U.S. Presidential Elections: The Historical Record

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How can we illuminate the pattern of outcomes in American presidential elections? I argue here for *incumbency advantage* as an account, drawing on simple data and electoral history back through 1788. Familiar as it is in the congressional realm, incumbency advantage could perhaps use more emphasis in the presidential realm. It seems to be a major factor there. Plausibly considered, for example, in light of the historical record regarding incumbency and elections, incumbent-free contests like those of 2000 and 2008 loom as even-up propositions in terms of either party's probable success. From the 1790s through 2000, omitting the peculiar multi-candidate election of 1824, parties holding the American presidency lost it exactly half the time when they did not run incumbent candidates.

## ACCOUNTS OF PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

In the accumulated lore of political science, there seem to exist three prominent accounts of presidential elections. In a *realignments* account, stable eras of party dominance are bounded by critical elections that upset coalitional patterns. A specific empirical expectation given this view, it is probably fair to say, would be a punctuated-equilibrium pattern of stability, change, stability, change, and so forth in party electoral success in presidential elections. Yet history has not been kind to this expectation.<sup>1</sup> Daniel J. Gans has shown, for example, that in the sequence of presidential elections from 1856 through 1980,

<sup>1</sup> See the argument in David R. Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments: A Critique of an American Genre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), chap. 4.

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the distribution of victory “runs” by party (Jimmy Carter, for example, was a run of one for the Democrats; Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush a run of three for the Republicans) did not differ significantly from what you would expect to get in a distribution of runs of heads and tails through coin flips.<sup>2</sup>

It is true that party success in congressional elections, notably for the House, has been stickier. At the congressional level, eras of party dominance have indeed occurred—often, for one thing, in the wake of economic downturns such as those of 1873, 1893, and 1929 (and also, according to one account, previously in 1857<sup>3</sup>) that badly discredited ruling parties. Following the slump of 1873, for example, the Democrats won control of the House in 1874 and held it for 16 of the next 20 years. Following the slumps of 1893 and 1929, the Republicans and Democrats won the House in, respectively, 1894 and 1930 and held it in each case for 16 consecutive years.<sup>4</sup> Of course not all congressional takeovers are economy driven, as the elections of 1994 and 2006 will attest.

Yet at least three reasons come to mind why party control stickiness might play a larger role in sequences of congressional elections than in presidential ones. First, personal incumbency always figures in the bulk of congressional contests at the district level—no doubt ordinarily to the net benefit of any national majority party that fields most of the incumbents. A leg-up effect for congressional incumbents has been especially prominent since the 1960s, but it does not seem to have been negligible in earlier times.<sup>5</sup> Second, once past the force of incumbency advantage, distributions of party identification among voters, ordinarily a force for stability, no doubt score more influence at the relatively inconspicuous congressional level than in presidential contests, in which candidate-centered information about non-incumbent as well as incumbent candidates is so rich. Since the mid-1950s, the percentage of party identifiers *not* voting for the House candidate of their own party if that candidate

<sup>2</sup> Daniel J. Gans, “Persistence of Party Success in American Presidential Elections,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 16 (Winter 1986): 228–230.

<sup>3</sup> James L. Huston, *The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), chap. 6. In particular, a Republican surge in the coal and iron areas of Pennsylvania, then the second largest state, following the Panic of 1857 helped loft the party to long-term control of the U.S. House. It goes without saying that slavery was a major nationwide concern in 1858 also.

<sup>4</sup> The stickiness of party success in the House popular vote is convincingly demonstrated in Helmut Norpoth and Jerrold G. Rusk, “Electoral Myth and Reality: Realignment in American Politics,” *Electoral Studies* 26 (June 2007): 392–403. This study, which was conducted without statistically privileging any canonical ideas about the existence of critical elections or realignment eras, points to the House elections of 1834, 1860, 1874, 1994, 1932, and 1994 as hinge points. Otherwise, closest to the authors’ cut-point and carrying a *p* value of roughly 0.07 is the midterm election of 1938, which, to the detriment of the ruling Democrats, followed the sharp economic downturn of 1937–38.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Jamie L. Carson and Jason M. Roberts, “Candidate Quality, the Personal Vote, and the Incumbency Advantage in Congress,” *American Political Science Review* 101 (May 2007): 289–301.

was an incumbent has averaged well down in single digits, occasionally reaching 10 percent. There is no evidence of trend. On the other hand, the share of identifiers *defecting* from their own party to vote for an *opposite-party* incumbent surged from roughly 15 percent in the mid-1950s to as high as 50 percent in the mid-1970s, then settled down into the 30s percentiles in the 1990s. In general, the picture here is of voters shaken away from their own party identification only by the complex of factors that favors House incumbents.<sup>6</sup>

Third, voters may examine credentials differently. Elected legislators are basically position takers. Elected executives are basically managers, and voter perceptions of managerial capability may cloud the usual party and ideological factors in elections—a consideration that probably helps explain the election of Republican governors in Rhode Island and Democratic governors in Utah. At any rate, as a matter of historical reality, party control stickiness has been one thing at the congressional level, quite another at the presidential level. It is a perhaps surprising aspect of presidential elections since World War II that, as of 2004, the in-party had kept control of the office in eight elections yet lost it in seven. This balance could not be evened. (These particular figures have nothing to do with the incidence of incumbent as opposed to non-incumbent candidates.)

A second account of presidential elections is supplied by the conceptual apparatus of *party identification*.<sup>7</sup> Possible voter “deviations” from a “normal vote” keyed to long-lasting distributions of party identification was the account of presidential elections pioneered by the authors of the Michigan election studies in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>8</sup> Voter deviations could occur, as they did in the Dwight D. Eisenhower elections, yet they were, well, deviations. Vexed though questions of its provenance and stability might be, party identification is undoubtedly a very good guide to behavior by individual voters. It is a less good guide to behavior by the full American electorate—at least on the binary question of which party finally comes out on top in presidential elections. During the twentieth century, for example—this skirts 2004, which seems to have brought exact parity between the parties in numbers of vote-casting party identifiers—the Republican Party apparently enjoyed a party identification advantage among actual voters (that is, nonvoters are omitted) in all contests from 1904 through 1932, and the Democrats an advantage in all contests from 1936 through 2000.<sup>9</sup> Yet in only 14 of these 25 instances did the party

<sup>6</sup> See Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (New York: Longman, 2001), 107–110. The period covered in the analysis is 1956–1998. Data source: American National Election Studies.

<sup>7</sup> For a recent treatment, see Donald P. Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler, *Partisan Hearts and Minds* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> As in, for example, Philip E. Converse, Angus Campbell, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, “Stability and Change in 1960: A Reinstating Election,” *American Political Science Review* 55 (June 1961): 269–280.

<sup>9</sup> Estimates for 1920 through 1948, based on recall data from national surveys conducted after 1950, are from Kristi Andersen, “Generation, Partisan Shift, and Realignment: A Glance Back to the

that actually won the presidency enjoy a party identification edge among voters at the time. Coin flips would have brought 12½ such victories, barely a worse showing.

I have taken “actually won the presidency” to mean the party that came to occupy the White House. Of course, that raises the complicating matter of the popular vote tilting one way and the electoral vote the other in very close elections. One such outcome during this century-long span was the familiar Bush–Gore contest of 2000. Another was possibly the Kennedy–Nixon contest of 1960. At issue regarding 1960 is the counting of the popular vote in Alabama, which was cast not for the presidential candidates themselves but rather for individual electors, many of them openly anti-Kennedy conservative Democrats chosen earlier in a hotly contested party primary, who eventually awarded their electoral votes to Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia. In the scholarship on the subject, a case has been mounted—and now probably stands at somewhere between respectable and compelling—that the Alabama popular vote that year should have been recorded by national counters in a fashion that would have yielded Richard Nixon a national popular vote edge over John F. Kennedy. Notably, the Democrats themselves, in preparing for their next national convention in 1964, allocated a delegate total to Alabama on an interpretation of that state’s Democratic popular vote in 1960 that would have given Nixon the national edge.<sup>10</sup>

A third account might be labeled *econometric* after its methodology and in the spirit of the stem “econo-.” For ample reasons, a leading explanatory growth stock, this brand of analysis places presidential elections in a time series perspective and ordinarily emphasizes ups and downs in the economy as independent variables.<sup>11</sup> Often represented too in such analyses are other kinds

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New Deal” in Norman H. Nie, Sidney Verba, and John R. Petrocik, *The Changing American Voter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 93. The accuracy of such recall-based estimates has been brought into doubt. See, for example, Richard G. Niemi, Richard S. Katz, and David Newman, “Reconstructing Past Partisanship: The Failure of the Party Identification Recall Questions,” *American Journal of Political Science* 24 (November 1980): 633–651. Yet the idea of a major change in the balance of party identification during Franklin Roosevelt’s first term is generally consistent with evidence on changes in voter registration by party supplied in James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System* (Washington DC: Brookings, 1983), 220–224.

<sup>10</sup> See Neal R. Peirce, *The People’s President* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 102–107; Brian J. Gaines, “Popular Myths about Popular Vote-Electoral College Splits,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34 (March 2001): 71–75; George C. Edwards III, *Why the Electoral College Is Bad for America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 48–51. To award the national vote edge to Kennedy “involves a moderate amount of license,” V.O. Key, Jr. wrote just after that election in 1961. See V.O. Key, “Interpreting the Election Returns” in Paul T. David, ed., *The Presidential Election and Transition 1960-61* (Washington DC: Brookings, 1961), 150–175 at 150.

<sup>11</sup> Recent examples in the genre include Larry M. Bartels and John Zaller, “Presidential Vote Models: A Recount,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34 (March 2001): 9–20; Robert S. Erikson, Joseph Bafumi, and Bret Wilson, “Was the 2000 Election Predictable? *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34 (December 2001): 815–819.

of variables—for example, the president’s Gallup rating or whether wars are going on. In principle, this tradition of analyzing elections econometrically is as capable of accommodating incumbency status as well as anything else. Yet economic variables ordinarily draw the high-gauge measurement techniques and the substantive emphasis. “Political economy” is the disciplinary rubric. Personal incumbency status has been a minor consideration at best.

### INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGE

By convention, the term *incumbency advantage* has come to refer to an electoral edge enjoyed by in-office persons, not by in-office parties. That much is clear. But otherwise, a fundamental ambiguity has inhered in the usage. On the one hand, incumbency advantage can refer to a statistical fact: For whatever reasons, candidates running again as incumbents perform better in elections than would or do candidates not holding that status.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the term can refer to an *explanation* of the statistical fact: Here is *why* candidates already holding office run better in elections. It is incumbency advantage! For example, incumbents may gain from distributing pork to constituents, they may raise more campaign money, or they may draw weak challengers.

Confusion can reign if these statistical and explanatory meanings are blended. This paper is chiefly, and in its early sections entirely, an investigation of incumbency advantage in its statistical sense. Yet the paper then proceeds to the explanatory side: If a statistical pattern exists, what might explain it? The latter discussion is designed to be speculative—not anything like conclusive. A misty aspect of it is that certain of the possible explanations of the statistical fact of incumbency advantage seem to deserve, by common-sense criteria, the label *incumbency advantage*, but some do not, and in other cases, it is not clear whether they do.

I want to argue here that incumbency advantage in the statistical sense, underpinned by a corresponding mix of at least promising causal factors, is a good candidate for an account of American presidential elections. Other current scholarship has been pointing this way. Herbert F. Weisberg, drawing on a study of pooled individual survey responses for elections from 1952 through 2000, reports that incumbent presidential candidates enjoyed a bonus of 6 percent in the popular vote.<sup>13</sup> Ray C. Fair, using aggregate data for elections from 1916 through 1996, reports a bonus of 4 percent.<sup>14</sup> David Samuels,

<sup>12</sup> This generalization holds for a variety of American public offices. See Stephen Ansolabehere and James M. Snyder, Jr., “The Incumbency Advantage in U.S. Elections: An Analysis of State and Federal Offices, 1942-2000,” *Election Law Journal* 1 (September 2002): 315-338.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert F. Weisberg, “Partisanship and Incumbency in Presidential Elections,” *Political Behavior* 24 (December 2002): 339-360.

<sup>14</sup> Ray C. Fair, *Predicting Presidential Elections and Other Things* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 46-51.

using aggregate data in an analysis of presidential elections in 23 countries including the United States, reports a bonus of over 8 percent.<sup>15</sup> All three of these studies control for economic conditions. Helmut Norpoth, in an analysis of American presidential elections from 1872 through 2000, reports that incumbent candidates have on balance benefited in, strictly speaking, some circumstances, although not all: In this dataset, a variable for economic conditions produces a sturdy coefficient with the expected sign when an incumbent candidate is running but not in open-seat circumstances. That is, incumbent candidates, but not in-office parties as such, seem to be aided when the economy is humming. Thus, Norpoth remarks of a specific instance, it is no surprise that the upbeat economy of 2000 was no help to Al Gore.<sup>16</sup>

### PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS BACK THROUGH 1788

Historical extensiveness is the particular analytic leverage I aim for here. I examine American presidential elections back not just through the mid-twentieth century or the beginning of reliable economic data but through the very first election featuring George Washington in 1788. Probing back beyond the 1830s is an especially unconventional tack. In their farthest penetrations, modern election analysts have tended to start their datasets in that Jacksonian decade when nationally uniform mass voting for the presidential office kicked in. For some purposes, this starting point of course makes a good deal of sense. But earlier U.S. political experience has come to be ignored as if it had taken place on another planet, and it did not.<sup>17</sup> It is true that “selection event” or some such term may fit the choice of presidents better in, say, 1788 and 1792 than the term “election,” conjuring up as the latter does images of routinized party competition, hustling politicians, and campaign broadsides.

Yet a vigorous participatory politics could underpin the selection of presidential electors by state legislatures during those early days, as evidently happened in, for example, 1812.<sup>18</sup> Alexander Hamilton himself hustled voters one by

<sup>15</sup> David Samuels, “Presidentialism and Accountability for the Economy in Comparative Perspective,” *American Political Science Review* 98 (August 2004): 425–436, at 428–429. This analysis is confined to instances in which presidential and legislative elections occurred concurrently.

<sup>16</sup> Helmut Norpoth, “Bush v. Gore: The Recount of Economic Voting” in Herbert F. Weisberg and Clyde Wilcox, eds., *Models of Voting in Presidential Elections* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 60–63.

<sup>17</sup> This point may become plainer as Phil Lampi makes available his new dataset “A New Nation Votes: American Election Returns, 1787–1825.” Gathered over a period of several decades through an examination of early American newspapers, this dataset supplies returns for elections to some 60,000 offices. See the discussion in Jill Lepore, “Party Time: Smear Tactics, Skulduggery, and the Debut of American Democracy,” *The New Yorker*, 17 September 2007, 94–98, at 97. For access to the Lampi dataset, see the website of the Antiquarian Society, <http://dca.tufts.edu/features/aas/>, accessed 14 March 2008.

<sup>18</sup> See Norman K. Risjord, “Election of 1812” in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed., *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789–1968*, vol. I (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 249–272.

one in the streets of Manhattan in 1800.<sup>19</sup> It was an era of open politics. Competition for the presidency could be tough; opposition forces could be mobilized. In certain key respects, that era was not all that different from our own. The first dozen elections of American history brought two incumbent losses (in 1800 and 1828) and, it is probably fair to say, four close finishes (in 1796, 1800, 1812, and 1824).<sup>20</sup> A recent estimate credits the Jeffersonian Republicans with roughly 52 percent of the major-party vote across a variety of offices in the high-stakes election of 1800. That is in the neighborhood of the percentage won by the Bush Republicans in 2004 for president and U.S. House. In the lifetimes of many of us, the last dozen elections through 2004 have brought three incumbent losses (in 1976, 1980, and 1992) and five close finishes (in 1960, 1968, 1976, 2000, and 2004).

The pre-1830s evidence I draw on here, I should perhaps say, does not swerve or motor the overall results, but it does help flesh out a complete historical picture. And it helps amass a dataset that is both satisfyingly large and, for analytic purposes, nicely divisible. Starting in 1788, the United States has seen through 2004 a total of 55 presidential elections of which 31 featured incumbent candidates and 24 were open-seat contests. Both costs and benefits are afforded by a 216-year-long dataset. On the one hand, times and relations among variables can obviously change. That can argue for confining any analysis to shorter time spans. On the other hand, small numbers are a continuing problem in studies of American presidential elections. Even a half century offers only twelve data points, a vulnerability that can spur illusory extrapolations to larger universes such as might attend witnessing three hurricanes during one month in Florida or pairs of Democratic senators from the Dakotas. The utility of the present study's long data series can be judged from its use. On its side is a reflection by Samuel P. Huntington that the United States enjoys "one of the world's more antique polities." Slash-and-burn as the country may be in countless ways, its basic political institutions date to the eighteenth century or earlier: "With a few exceptions, such as a handful of colleges and churches, the oldest institutions in American society are governmental institutions."<sup>21</sup> That can make for an often surprising sameness or continuity in the way these institutions, including the selecting of presidents, operate.

### CLOSENESS OF ELECTIONS

Incumbency advantage will be taken up directly, but before that, it may be illuminating to probe a related pattern in the split dataset. That is, presidential

<sup>19</sup> Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 608. On the contest in New York City in 1800, see also Edward J. Larson, *A Magnificent Catastrophe: The Tumultuous Election of 1800, America's First Presidential Campaign* (New York: Free Press, 2007), chap. 4.

<sup>20</sup> See Lepore, "Party Time," for the Lambi estimates.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 129, 133.

TABLE 1  
*Popular Vote Edges in Presidential Elections<sup>a</sup>*

0–4.9%	5–9.9%	10–14.9%	15–19.9%	>20%
<i>Elections with Incumbent Candidates Running (with Winners Named, and Non-incumbent Winners Underlined)</i>				
1800 <sup>b</sup> <u>Jefferson</u>	1840 <u>W. Harrison</u>	1828 <u>Jackson</u>	1804 <sup>b</sup> Jefferson	1792 <sup>b</sup> Washington
1812 <sup>b</sup> <u>Madison</u>	1900 <u>McKinley</u>	1864 <u>Lincoln</u>	1832 Jackson	1820 <sup>b</sup> Monroe
1888 <u>B. Harrison</u>	1940 F.D. Roosevelt	1872 Grant	1904 T. Roosevelt	1924 Coolidge
1892 <u>Cleveland</u>	1944 F.D. Roosevelt	1912 <u>Wilson</u>	1932 <u>F.D. Roosevelt</u>	1936 F.D. Roosevelt
1916 Wilson	1980 <u>Reagan</u>		1956 <u>Eisenhower</u>	1964 L.B. Johnson
1948 Truman	1992 <u>Clinton</u>		1984 Reagan	1972 Nixon
1976 <u>Carter</u>	1996 Clinton			
2004 G.W. Bush				
<i>Open-seat Elections (with Winners Named)</i>				
1796 <sup>b</sup> J. Adams	1808 <sup>b</sup> Madison	1816 <sup>b</sup> Monroe	1928 Hoover	1788 <sup>b</sup> Washington
1824 <sup>b</sup> J.Q. Adams	1852 Pierce	1836 Van Buren		1920 Harding
1844 Polk	1868 Grant	1856 Buchanan		
1848 Taylor	1908 Taft	1860 Lincoln		
1876 Hayes	1988 G.H.W. Bush	1952 Eisenhower		
1880 Garfield				
1884 Cleveland				
1896 McKinley				
1960 Kennedy				
1968 Nixon				
2000 G.W. Bush				

<sup>a</sup>Winner's percent of the total vote minus runner-up's percent of the total vote.

<sup>b</sup>The value for popular vote spread is imputed. Used as a lever is the statistical relation between electoral vote spread and popular vote spread in the elections from 1828 through 2004.

elections featuring incumbents have tended to be more one-sided than open-seat contests. This pattern is not surprising, but it is quite clear, and its shape and details are worth appreciating. See Table 1, which accommodates the 31 incumbent-featuring elections in its top half and the 24 open-seat contests in its bottom half. For any election, in principle, my measure of closeness is popular vote edge—that is, the winning candidate's percentage of the total popular vote minus the runner-up's percentage of the total popular vote. The runner-up is the second-place finisher in the popular vote, which means Stephen Douglas in 1860 and Theodore Roosevelt in 1912.

I say in principle because summary popular vote totals for president are nonexistent or worthless before the 1830s. To get around that problem, I have taken a flight of I hope warranted fancy here and imputed the earlier totals. A relevant relationship that does exist allows this move: in general, during the century and two-thirds of mass-turnout politics starting around 1830, popular vote edges in elections have corresponded significantly if imperfectly to the, magnified to be sure, electoral vote edges in those elections. Accordingly, I have calculated backwards, so to speak, the relationship between electoral vote

edges (here the  $X$  value)<sup>22</sup> and popular vote edges (here the  $Y$  value) for elections between 1828 and 2004,<sup>23</sup> then used the values of the resulting equation to simulate popular vote edges for the earlier elections, given those elections' actual electoral vote edges. Omitted from the calculation are the elections of 1860 and 1912 that brought major-party schisms, and that of 1864, for which the relation between popular and electoral vote edges was way out of line, owing no doubt to the Civil War and the absence of the Southern states from the electoral universe. My assumption, in these calculations, which anecdotal material for the earlier elections seems to bear out, is that a vigorous nationally oriented politics of varying closeness was occurring at lower levels during those times and that the electoral vote edges are a useful if clumsy guide to it. At any rate, precision is not needed; it is good enough to locate the simulated values in rather broad categories.

“Incumbent candidates” in Table 1 means all candidates who were presidents at the time they ran again, notwithstanding how they reached the White House in the first place. That is, the set includes Theodore Roosevelt in 1904, Calvin Coolidge in 1924, Harry S. Truman in 1948, Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, and Gerald Ford in 1976—all of whom rose from vice president to president when their elected predecessors died or, in the case of Richard Nixon, resigned. As it happens, these five vice presidential successors were not slouches as candidates. Four of them kept the White House running as incumbents, and in terms of popular vote edges, three of them—Roosevelt, Coolidge, and Johnson—scored in the top five among the 26 incumbents who have faced election since the mid-1820s. “Winners” in Table 1 means, as earlier, candidates who actually made it to the White House even if they ran behind in the popular vote as happened in 1824, 1876, 1888, and 2000.<sup>24</sup> Thus the leftmost column in

<sup>22</sup> More specifically, for each election, this is the difference between the winner's and the runner-up's percentage of the total electoral vote.

<sup>23</sup> This is a statistical relation, although obviously not a causal one. In the cases of elections in which popular and electoral vote edges went in different directions, the values for the popular vote edges in these calculations are slightly negative.

<sup>24</sup> This is marshy territory. Not only is the election of 1960 a puzzle, there is also a certain artificiality to the results of the very close elections of 1884 and 1888. Only a slight relaxing of the intimidation of African American voters in the South—nothing on the order of overturning the Democratic regimes of the decisively black-majority states of Mississippi and South Carolina—would probably have yielded a national popular edge for the Republican, James Blaine, juxtaposed with an electoral edge for the Democrat, Grover Cleveland, in 1884, or a joint popular and electoral vote edge for the Republican, Benjamin Harrison, in 1888. There is also 1880. A rainstorm in the wrong place that year might have washed away Republican James Garfield's national popular vote edge of fewer than 10,000 votes, although perhaps not his electoral vote edge, thus yielding another split result. At a level more basic than a rainstorm, a small Democratic edge in the 1880 popular vote during this era of dubious counts could also have been plausibly credited to the intimidation of African Americans in the South. Various conflicting reports place the national Garfield margin at 1,898, 7,368, or 9,457 votes. See Kenneth D. Ackerman, *Dark Horse: The Surprise Election and Political Murder of President James A. Garfield* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2003), 13.

the table, which houses elections in the 0 to 4.9 percent category of popular vote edges, includes certain readings with slightly negative, in this sense, values. Each election in Table 1 is accompanied by the name of its winner. Among the winners, the names of challenger candidates who defeated incumbents—such as the victorious Carter in 1976—are underlined.

A lesson in passing from Table 1 is that the country's early elections probably merit more attention than they have ordinarily received. Of the table's imputed values of the popular vote, perhaps the most interesting is the close reading for 1812. An incumbent candidate was running that year—James Madison—but it was wartime and the War of 1812 was not going well. For one thing, the British had occupied Detroit. In the election campaign, the opposition Federalists broached the kind of blended position and valence appeal that would later afflict Abraham Lincoln, Harry Truman, Lyndon B. Johnson, and George W. Bush: This war was a mistake, and anyway, it is being conducted badly. Pennsylvania, Ohio, and North Carolina were thought to be in play in 1812. Pennsylvania by itself made the difference as the nationwide electoral vote divided, in percentage terms, 59 to 41. That edge approximates those of Truman over Thomas E. Dewey in 1948, Kennedy over Nixon in 1960, and Nixon over Hubert H. Humphrey in 1968. The Federalists fared even better in 1812 at state legislative and gubernatorial levels. It would probably have taken worse military losses to propel De Witt Clinton to the White House over Madison—the final result within Pennsylvania was not particularly close—but this was a lively, uncertain, volatile, and close-fought politics.<sup>25</sup>

Across the top half of Table 1, the elections featuring incumbents have ranged rather evenly from close contests to landslides. Some have been close, as in 1812 and 2004, but most have not. Of course, most of these entries reflect incumbents winning again by comfortable margins—an unsurprising theme. But that does not exhaust the entries. Some incumbents have *lost* by huge margins—Herbert Hoover to Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932, John Quincy Adams to Andrew Jackson in 1828, William Howard Taft to Woodrow Wilson in 1912 (in fact, Taft trailed the challenger Wilson by an even worse 18 percent than the table suggests, since Theodore Roosevelt, the third-party challenger who finished second in that contest, counts here as the runner-up). Decisive also (beyond a five-point edge) were Martin Van Buren's loss to William Henry Harrison in 1840, Carter's to Reagan in 1980, and George H.W. Bush's to Bill Clinton in 1992. What seems to happen is that being in office gives an *opportunity* for continued electoral success, but that the opportunity can be blown—sometimes spectacularly blown. Bad luck, as with Hoover, weighed down by the Great Depression in 1932, is only part of the story. Executives are closely watched. Through certain kinds of behavior, they can risk alienating virtually everybody. That may hold for executives of private as well as public

<sup>25</sup> See Risjord, "Election of 1812"; Marshall Smelser, *The Democratic Republic, 1801-1815* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 245–248.

institutions. In a category with John Quincy Adams, William Howard Taft, and Jimmy Carter may belong such figures as recalled ex-governor Gray Davis of California and ex-editor in chief Howell Raines of *The New York Times*, as well as a number of dethroned monarchs and discredited university presidents.

Open-seat presidential contests, however, tend to be close. Roughly half the elections in the bottom half of Table 1 were quite close. Absent an incumbent running, the politics tends to flash to fifty-fifty. It seems to take a lot to generate an open-seat landslide—for example, in 1816, the collapse of the Federalists once the War of 1812 had ended in a nationalistic haze; in 1856, the demise of the Whigs; and in 1860, the sectional schism among Democrats. As for the two extreme outliers in the southeast quadrant of Table 1, one reflects George Washington's near-coronation as the first president in 1788. In 1920, the electorate seems to have cast an overwhelming verdict against the Democrats' conduct of World War I and its tempestuous aftermath.<sup>26</sup>

#### INCUMBENCY AND PARTY SUCCESS

As a window into incumbency advantage, possibly nothing is more illuminating than a simple binary measure of whether a party running an incumbent candidate excels in winning elections. Hence Table 2, which sorts the American presidential contests as earlier into two categories—elections with an incumbent running and open-seat contests—and then, within each category, tracks the success of in-office *parties* in keeping the office. Thus, for example, the in-office Republicans kept the presidency with Reagan in 1984 and George H.W. Bush in 1988, but the in-office Democrats lost it with Carter in 1980 and Al Gore in 2000.

Here, the dataset accommodates only 53 elections rather than the earlier 55, since in two instances, it makes little or no sense to ask whether an in-office party won again. Those are the election of 1788, when the presidency was new, and that of 1824, when all the serious contenders for the office, notwithstanding their pronounced differences, operated inside the then-hegemonic Democratic-Republican Party—a sure guarantee of party continuity. Judgment calls were needed. I coded the Federalists as the in-office party in 1792 and 1796 even though George Washington may not have adopted exactly that identity. I coded the Whigs and Republicans as in-office parties in, respectively, 1844 and 1868 on the ground that those parties had won the preceding presidential elections and staffed the resulting presidencies—even though John Tyler and Andrew Johnson, the vice presidents who succeeded to the White House through deaths in the interim, turned out to be far from party regulars. In 1864, not just for technical reasons, the winning ticket had been labeled Union rather than Republican. Note that to reverse the coding decisions for 1844 and 1868

<sup>26</sup> On the case of 1920, see David R. Mayhew, "Wars and American Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (September 2005): 473–493, at 484.

TABLE 2  
*Has the Party Holding the Presidency Kept It?*<sup>a</sup>

<i>Elections with an Incumbent Candidate Running</i>	
<i>Yes, Kept the Presidency (N = 21)</i>	<i>No, Lost the Presidency (N = 10)</i>
1792 Washington	1800 J. Adams lost to Jefferson
1804 Jefferson	1828 J.Q. Adams lost to Jackson
1812 Madison	1840 Van Buren lost to W.H. Harrison
1820 Monroe	1888 Cleveland lost to B. Harrison
1832 Jackson	1892 B. Harrison lost to Cleveland
1864 Lincoln	1912 Taft lost to Wilson
1872 Grant	1932 Hoover lost to F.D. Roosevelt
1900 McKinley	1976 Ford lost to Carter
1904 T. Roosevelt	1980 Carter lost to Reagan
1916 Wilson	1992 G.H.W. Bush lost to Clinton
1924 Coolidge	
1936 F.D. Roosevelt	
1940 F. D. Roosevelt	
1944 F.D. Roosevelt	
1948 Truman	
1956 Eisenhower	
1964 L.B. Johnson	
1972 Nixon	
1984 Reagan	
1996 Clinton	
2004 G.W. Bush	
<i>Elections without an Incumbent Running (with Winners Named)</i>	
<i>Yes, Kept the Presidency (N = 11)</i>	<i>No, Lost the Presidency (N = 11)</i>
1796 J. Adams	1844 Polk
1808 Madison	1848 Taylor
1816 Monroe	1852 Pierce
1836 Van Buren	1860 Lincoln
1856 Buchanan	1884 Cleveland
1868 Grant	1896 McKinley
1876 Hayes	1920 Harding
1880 Garfield	1952 Eisenhower
1908 Taft	1960 Kennedy
1928 Hoover	1968 Nixon
1988 G.H.W. Bush	2000 G.W. Bush

<sup>a</sup>Omitted from the calculations are 1788, when the presidency was new, and 1824, when all the serious contenders for the office were of the same hegemonic party.

would not alter the summary figures here, since the victorious Whigs of 1840 *lost* in 1844, whereas the victorious Republicans (Unionists) of 1864 *won* in 1868. As stated earlier, Ford—to date the only holder of the presidential office not to have won election on a previous national party ticket as at least vice president—as well as the other vice presidential succeeders who came to lead their parties' presidential tickets are accommodated in Table 2 as generic incumbent candidates. Franklin D. Roosevelt makes three appearances in the table as an incumbent running again.

The pattern in Table 2 is clear. Incumbent candidacy makes a difference. When I first compiled these figures in early 2004, the results had a kind of Pythagorean neatness—in-office parties had kept the presidency exactly two-thirds of the time (20 out of 30 instances) when they ran incumbent candidates, and exactly half the time (11 out of 22 instances) when they did not. The Bush–Kerry outcome in 2004 clouded the two-thirds fraction a bit. As it happens (see the discussion below), Christopher Achen has contributed a theoretical analysis that predicts exactly such a two-thirds result given the deployment of incumbent candidates elected once earlier.<sup>27</sup>

Admittedly, this 53-item dataset, especially once it is subdivided, is still too small to permit sure inferences. A roughly one-in-ten probability remains that no relationship at all exists between the two key variables of incumbent candidacy and in-office party electoral success. A suitable test for a conjunction of the 21-10 and 11-11 patterns yields a  $p$  value of 0.103. If the pre-mass-turnout elections before 1828 are dropped from the analysis, a conjunction of 17-9 and 8-11 patterns yields a  $p$  value of 0.065. These differences hover near, but do not quite reach, conventional levels of inferential significance at the 0.05 level.<sup>28</sup> Similar results arise from two alternative codings. If the popular vote victors, as opposed to the electoral vote victors, are declared to be the real winners—that is, if the outcomes of the elections of 1876, 1888, and 2000 are reversed—a conjunction of 22-9 and 11-11 yields a  $p$  value of 0.065. If the Kennedy–Nixon election of 1960 is added to these three reversals, a conjunction of 22-9 and 12-10 yields a  $p$  value of 0.117. A less-impressive result obtains if the five elections involving the vice presidential succeeders are declared to be open-seat elections. In this event, a conjunction of 17-9 and 15-12 yields a relatively unimpressive  $p$  value of 0.244. This last coding of the succeeders is theoretically respectable, as will be seen below, given especially the impressive Achen analysis. Yet also as seen below, certain additional theoretical underpinnings of incumbency advantage argue for coding as I have executed it. On balance, on the commonsense ground that the presidential office, however risen to, may confer various nontrivial electoral pluses, I am reluctant to banish Theodore Roosevelt, Coolidge, Truman, Johnson, and Ford from their status in Table 2 as election-facing incumbents. It seems a good bet that the apparent edge enjoyed by election-facing White House incumbents is multiply caused.

As for further temporal disaggregation, a variety of patterns can emerge through subdividing the data by eras, and stories can be woven about such patterns; yet, aside from the mid-1820s, it is not clear where to bound the eras, and whatever the boundaries might be, the numbers available for analysis are small. For example, in-parties kept the presidency 8 out of 14 times before 1900 in open-seat circumstances, but have done so only 3 out of 8 times since 1900 in

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Achen, “A Baseline for Incumbency Effects” (manuscript, Princeton University, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> These and the following results issue from a single-tailed brute-force test suitable for small samples. I owe the calculations to Joel Middleton and Joseph Sempolinski.

those circumstances. It would probably be hazardous to discern much meaning in such a disparity.

In Table 2, the pattern of 11 out of 22 victories in open-seat circumstances, an exactly 50 percent success rate, is perhaps especially striking. At the presidential level, once unsupplied with incumbent candidates, the American in-office parties seem to enjoy no electoral advantage at all. This fifty-fifty result corresponds to a finding by Gans. For the presidential elections of 1856 through 1980, using relative sizes of popular vote pluralities (rather than win versus loss) as dependent variable, there is no statistical relation between a party's previous and its current electoral strength once elections featuring repeat candidates (that is, an incumbent running again, or a repeat challenger such as William Jennings Bryan in 1900) are removed from the picture. "When the effect of voter response to candidate personality is removed from the analysis, the short-term persistence of party success declines to levels indistinguishable from zero."<sup>29</sup> As another open-seat election—the country's twenty-fifth (counting 1788 and 1824)—looms in 2008, the best prediction derivable from Table 1 is that it will be close and that there is no telling from Table 2 which party will win it. Of course, contextual information specific to 2008 could improve the prediction, much as this morning's forecast ordinarily performs better than the *Farmer's Almanac* in predicting the weather.

### THE "WHY" QUESTION

Incumbency advantage in its statistical sense is a fair label for the two-thirds versus one-half disparity shown above. Explaining the disparity, assuming that it is real, is another matter. In the study of congressional elections, the "why" question regarding incumbency advantage has drawn a good deal of attention and ingenuity cumulating in a plurality of promising ideas and, sometimes, thoughtful lists of usual suspects. Here, with the presidential elections, I will not try to do much better than present a list of plausible suspects.<sup>30</sup> In certain particulars, however, the extensiveness afforded by the 216-year dataset seems to allow some leverage.

Listed in Table 3 are six categories of explanation that seem to deserve at least a mention. Certain of them are elaborated into subcategories. Some of these ideas, however compelling they may be, will be noted only in passing. Often there is not very much useful that can be said. I will devote special attention to the fifth and sixth categories, not because I believe they promise particularly high payoff—indeed, I believe they do not—but because they are analytically interesting, they warrant attention, and the dataset allows it. As for which of these six categories merit the label "incumbency advantage" in its

<sup>29</sup> See Gans, "Persistence of Party Success," 232.

<sup>30</sup> For a helpful discussion of the range of possibilities, see James E. Campbell, *The American Campaign* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2000), 40–42, 110–123.

TABLE 3

*Possible Explanations of the Two-thirds Versus One-half Disparity**Categories of Explanation*

- 
- 1) Incumbent capabilities acquired due to holding office
    - Skills
    - Resources
    - Prerogatives
    - Valence issue positioning
  - 2) Incumbent capability acquired in waging the preceding election campaign
  - 3) Voter attitudes
    - Risk averseness
    - Perceived start-up costs
    - Optimal contract
    - Inertia
  - 4) Innately superior talent
  - 5) Incumbent party fatigue
  - 6) Strategic behavior
    - The out-of-office party
    - The in-office party
- 

explanatory sense, that is not easy to say. If the term hinges on behavior that an election-seeking incumbent is capable of engaging in as a consequence of holding the presidential office, or of having previously won it, then only the first and second categories clearly qualify. A slightly more generous construction will pick up category three. Category four, strictly speaking, however important it may be, may not qualify. It is difficult to say. The answer is no for category five, and a suspended judgment for category six. It is not important to get these discriminations exactly right—they speak to an inherently ambiguous language use—but it is worthwhile to hammer home the point that the statistical connotation of the term *incumbency advantage* is one thing, the explanatory connotation of it quite another.

## SOME “WHY” ANSWERS

The first category of Table 3 is largely well-grounded common sense. As a consequence of holding the presidential office, incumbents can acquire or win access to skills, resources, and prerogatives. In the line of skills, presidents, as they get grayer, possibly ordinarily get better—both as executives and as politicians. Consonant with this intuition, at another level of office, is that U.S. House members on average keep improving their percentages election after election until their fifteenth terms.<sup>31</sup> In the line of resources, an incumbent president is not likely to have a hard time, for example, funding a new campaign. In the line of prerogatives, incumbent presidents can choose when and if

<sup>31</sup> See John R. Hibbing, *Congressional Careers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 32–35.

to make speeches, break ribbons, sign bills, issue executive orders, send off cruise missiles, hand out ice during Florida hurricanes (as George W. Bush did in 2004), and engage in many other kinds of possibly vote-winning behavior. All this is standard. At a more complex level, Tim Groseclose has recently argued that the opportunity enjoyed by incumbents to cater to electorates through “nonpolicy” or “valence” moves such as the above exercises of office—an opportunity lacking to challenger candidates—enables them to position themselves closer to the ideological center in campaigns than do challengers who need to keep catering to their activist bases through fiery issue stands.<sup>32</sup> On balance, centrism in campaigns is probably a help.

Category two in Table 3 accommodates an easy, credible claim: having run and won a presidential campaign last time may be a help to running one this time. This argument works less well for the nineteenth century, when presidential candidates were recessive. But they were not always recessive, and sometimes they had managers who gained experience across campaigns.

The third category ushers in voters, who may give an edge to incumbent presidents as such for a variety of reasons. Risk averseness may come into play.<sup>33</sup> At the executive level, this consideration probably implicates managerial style and capacity as much as it does left–right policy predictability. In 1964, Senator Barry Goldwater’s comment about “lobbing one into the men’s room of the Kremlin” might have hurt him more than anything to do with his left–right voting score. In 1972, the very lurches in Senator George McGovern’s own campaign raised question marks about management. In general, the devil you know may be a better bet than the one you don’t. As regards risk averseness for the short term, voters may peer ahead to the start-up costs of a new presidency—a plausible worry, given, for example, the many months it takes to staff the executive branch. Although the 1960 election was, to be sure, open-seat and thus not directly relevant here, although it allows a point, many voters watching President John F. Kennedy in his early phase handle the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 might have reflected: bring back Dwight D. Eisenhower.<sup>34</sup> Another entry for the third category is an “optimal contract” idea: in the long run, it may not pay electorates wishing good service to discard their public servants wantonly or capriciously.<sup>35</sup> Yet another entry is voter inertia. Voters may just stay stuck in their previous decisions. For one thing, in an effort to ward off cognitive dissonance, they may bend upward their appraisals of in-

<sup>32</sup> See Tim Groseclose, “A Model of Candidate Location When One Candidate Has a Valence Advantage,” *American Journal of Political Science* 45 (October 2001): 862–886. This model does not address candidates for specifically the presidency.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, M. Daniel Bernhardt and Daniel E. Ingberman, “Candidate Reputations and the ‘Incumbency Effect,’” *Journal of Public Economics* 27 (June 1985): 47–67.

<sup>34</sup> On Kennedy, Eisenhower, and the Bay of Pigs, see Philip B.K. Potter, “Does Experience Matter? American Presidential Experience, Age, and International Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51 (June 2007): 351–378, at 355–358.

<sup>35</sup> I owe this idea to Alan Gerber.

cumbent officials so as to convince themselves that they didn't make a mistake in voting for those officials in the first place.<sup>36</sup>

The fourth category hinges on personal political talent that is innate—or at least acquired somewhere early in life, as in the crib or high school. On offer is a “prizefighters” theory—an argument crafted by John Zaller to account for incumbency advantage among members of Congress (MCs). The idea can extend to presidents. It goes: “The reason that incumbent MCs win reelection at very high rates is the same reason that world heavyweight boxing champions win most of their title defenses: owing to their manner of selection, incumbent champions in both professions are simply better competitors than most of the opponents they face.” The case continues: “Incumbents, who, in order to become incumbents, must either beat other incumbents or win open-seat contests, are a more selected group than challengers and hence likely to be more-skilled competitors . . . .”<sup>37</sup> In short, a selection effect is at work. Incumbents are premium politicians within their contest class. This is an appealing idea. It is not much help with the vice presidential succeeders who have not won earlier presidential contests on their own, but it can apply to the generality of presidents. Carried out in this view is a probably widespread intuition that many American presidents might have been just plain unbeatable if only the ageing process, the two-term norm, or the Twenty-Second Amendment had not intruded—Thomas Jefferson, Clinton, Eisenhower, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and others. Zaller presents a list of heavyweight boxing victories, of which half a page is devoted to Joe Louis,<sup>38</sup> and on reading it, one's mind wanders to Franklin D. Roosevelt here in Table 2. It is the prizefighters idea that fuels the prediction by Achen, building from a formal analysis, of precisely a two-thirds success rate for incumbents elected once earlier.<sup>39</sup>

### INCUMBENT PARTY FATIGUE

On exhibit here, strictly speaking, is the disparity between the two-thirds and the one-half fractions of Table 2. What might be the causes of that disparity? Possible extraneous or artifactual considerations need to be taken into account—that is, ones that would not likely appear in any commonsense discussion of incumbency advantage in its *explanatory* meaning. One such factor, to

<sup>36</sup> See Sendhil Mullainathan and Ebonya Washington, “Sticking with Your Vote: Cognitive Dissonance and Voting” (paper presented at the American Politics Seminar, Yale University, 5 September 2007).

<sup>37</sup> John Zaller, “Politicians as Prize Fighters: Electoral Selection and Incumbency Advantage” in John G. Geer, ed., *Politicians and Party Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 125, 126.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>39</sup> See Achen, “A Baseline for Incumbency Effects.” From the paper's abstract: “Incumbents would generally be re-elected even without the advantages of office, since they are proven winners and thus likely to defeat the average challenger.”

use the terminology of Larry M. Bartels and John Zaller, is the fifth category in Table 3: incumbent party fatigue. For whatever reasons, all else equal, a party in control of the American presidency tends to lose one-half a percentage point of the popular vote for each consecutive term it holds that office. One reason may be that an out-party gets hungrier, more focused, and more inclined to appease the median voter the longer it keeps losing.<sup>40</sup> For the analysis here, this pattern poses a difficulty. As a matter of fact, during American history, a party's typical deployment of an incumbent candidate has come after *one* term of controlling the presidential office. The in-party has just freshly captured the office from the opposition four years ago and is now running its incumbent president again, as with Reagan in 1984 or Clinton in 1996. Yet by contrast, owing at least to the two-term norm and the Twenty-Second Amendment, an in-office party's typical exposure to an open-seat election has come after *two* terms of controlling the presidential office—as with the Republicans in 1988 and the Democrats in 2000. The implication is as follows. On average, at least slightly, the possibly basic phenomenon of incumbent party fatigue, which on evidence is less deadly after one term than after two terms, could be contributing to the *statistical* pattern of incumbency advantage exhibited in Table 2. The open-seat candidate Gore, to cite a generic example, may have suffered a bit more from it after eight Democratic years in 2000 than did the incumbent candidate Clinton after four Democratic years in 1996.

A plausible reaction to the above is that incumbent party fatigue no doubt prevails but that incumbent candidates no doubt also enjoy an edge independent of it. As it happens, that is exactly the finding of Samuels, on both fronts statistically robust, in his study of executive elections in 23 presidential democracies.<sup>41</sup> It is the finding of Fair in his study of U.S. presidential elections from 1916 through 1996.<sup>42</sup> For a suggestive investigation of the American experience farther back, see Table 4. The dependent variable here is the in-office party's percentage of the major-party popular vote in the 43 presidential elections from 1828 through 2004 (omitting the party schism elections of 1860 and 1912). Entered as independent variables are, for each election, the number of terms the in-office party had consecutively held the presidency at that time, and whether the in-office party was running an incumbent candidate. There are three models: the independent variables are entered alone and then simulta-

<sup>40</sup> For an analysis of incumbent party fatigue based on the elections of 1948 through 2000, see Bartels and Zaller, "Presidential Vote Models," 17. Certain forecasting models have also pointed to in-party decay: Alan I. Abramowitz, "When Good Forecasts Go Bad: The Time-for-Change Model and the 2004 Presidential Election," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 37 (October 2004): 745–746; Helmut Norpoth, "From Primary to General Election: A Forecast of the Presidential Vote," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 37 (October 2004): 737–740. In general, a homeostatic tendency toward party equilibrium should be the result of in-party decay, as is suggested in Donald E. Stokes, "On the Existence of Forces Restoring Party Competition," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 26 (Summer 1962): 159–171.

<sup>41</sup> Samuels, "Presidentialism and Accountability," 428–429.

<sup>42</sup> Fair, *Predicting Presidential Elections*, 46–51.

TABLE 4  
*Incumbent Party Fatigue Versus Incumbent Candidacy as Explanations of Popular Vote Share, 1828–2004<sup>a</sup>*

	Model A	Model B	Model C
Constant	0.549*** (0.017)	0.503*** (0.014)	0.528*** (0.023)
<i>N</i> terms party has held presidency	−0.013* (0.007)		−0.010 (0.008)
Whether an incumbent candidate		0.033* (0.019)	0.025 (0.019)
<i>N</i>	43	43	43
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.079	0.073	0.116
<i>F</i> value	3.51*	3.22*	2.61*

Note: The dependent variable is the percent of the major-party popular vote won by the candidate of the party currently holding the presidency, in elections from 1828 through 2004 (omitting 1864 and 1912).

<sup>a</sup>Standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\* Significant at 0.001; \* significant at 0.10.

neously. The overall fits are poor, and the relevant variables struggle to reach significance, but the results point the same way as Samuels's.<sup>43</sup> Incumbent candidacy does seem to stand on its own bottom. A boost on the order of 2 or 3 percent may stem from it. Also, incumbent party fatigue seems to stand on its own bottom. An in-office party may hemorrhage on the order of 1 percent per election during a consecutive span of White House control (which is twice the ½ percent found by Bartels and Zaller with incumbent candidacy not controlled for). For purposes here, it is probably safe to rule out the idea that the disparity between the fractions shown in Table 2 is an effect of incumbent party fatigue.

#### STRATEGIC BEHAVIOR—THE OUT-PARTY

A final possible contributor to the disparity between fractions in Table 2 is strategic behavior. That might take place in either the out-party or the in-party, which I will take up here in that order. In the study of U.S. House elections, a familiar and very credible case is that the out-party in a district, confronted by a well-anchored incumbent, may through failing to field a “quality candidate” bolster the winning margin and possibly the victory prospect of the incumbent.<sup>44</sup> This is strategic behavior by a party or its potential candidates. Obviously, in any electoral universe, a widespread wimping out by the outs can bolster the fortunes of the ins.

Does the two-thirds success rate of presidential incumbents during American history reflect any such opposition tendency? It seems doubtful.<sup>45</sup> At the

<sup>43</sup>The *F* value for the equation accommodating the two *X* variables, a test of their joint significance, is 2.61, yielding a *p* value of 0.0859.

<sup>44</sup>See Gary C. Jacobson and Samuel Kernell, *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).

<sup>45</sup>See the argument in Weisberg, “Partisanship and Incumbency,” 342.

presidential level, the stakes are too high. Campaigns can offer too many surprises. The outcomes are not as foregone as in “safe” congressional districts. Resources for a respectable challenge are likely to be available. A politician who aches for the White House probably cannot afford to wait. In fact, contests for even the most unpromising out-party presidential nominations tend to be hard-fought. Also, the rest of the party ticket is at issue. In general, a major party cannot afford to sit out a presidential election. Occasionally we hear stories that an opposition party’s A-candidates sat out an unpromising election in favor of its B-candidates, as in the case of Mario Cuomo and others allegedly making way for Clinton in 1992. But those stories are rare and anyway suspect: Energy, determination, and willingness to take risks are nontrivial traits of an A-candidate. Clinton had those traits in 1992 and Cuomo did not.

Possible food for thought on this question is the actual record of American out-parties in fielding presidential candidates in challenger as opposed to open-seat circumstances. Have the candidates differed in quality? See Table 5 for a list of the relevant candidates and the highlights of their résumés at the times of selection. It is hard to see any difference.<sup>46</sup>

#### STRATEGIC BEHAVIOR—THE IN-PARTY

As for in-party strategic behavior, on offer is what might be called the Senator Tribble option. In 1988, freshman Republican Senator Paul S. Tribble, Jr. of Virginia, then 41 years old, facing probable defeat by a popular Democratic governor, chose to retire to private life rather than run again for the Senate, on the apparent ground that retiring was a more appealing prospect than losing. If every incumbent acted that way, assuming access to reasonably accurate information about electoral environments, few incumbent candidates would ever lose elections. In the presidential realm, that would mean a disappearance from the electoral loss column of incumbent candidates like a preemptively retiring Taft in 1912 or a Hoover in 1932. Also, by way of another causal route to the elimination of losses in November elections by incumbent candidates, parties might choose to trade in their weak incumbents for better nominees. In a world of strategic calculations like these, it is easy to see how the two-thirds fraction in Table 2 might soar toward the 100 percent mark. In the real world, we have to wonder whether such calculations might have helped loft the two-thirds fraction as high as it is. In the dataset of 53 presidential elections, it would not have taken a great deal of strategic manipulation to open up the space between the two-thirds fraction and the one-half fraction.

In actual practice, has strategic behavior played any such role? For a stab at an answer, see Table 6. Isolated here are 30 presidential elections in which a selection of incumbents in an especially auspicious position to appear as their party’s candidates seem apt for a test. This number is small for statistical

<sup>46</sup> The Federalists had a weak bench after 1800, but it was weak in all circumstances.

TABLE 5

*Career Backgrounds of Presidential Candidates of the Party Not Currently in Possession of the White House, in Challenger and Open-seat Circumstances*

<i>Challengers to Incumbent Presidents</i>	<i>Candidates in Open-seat Elections</i>
1800 – Jefferson, Secretary of State, Vice President	1796 – Jefferson, Secretary of State
1804 – Pinckney, diplomat, ex-vice presidential candidate	1808 – Pinckney, diplomat, ex-presidential candidate
1812 – D.W. Clinton, Mayor (NYC), Senator (NY)	1816 – King, Senator (NY)
1828 – Jackson, General, ex-presidential candidate	1836 – W. Harrison, General
1832 – Clay, Senator, Speaker of the House (KY)	1844 – Polk, Speaker of the House (TN)
1840 – W. Harrison, General, ex-presidential candidate	1848 – Taylor, General
1864 – McClellan, General	1852 – Pierce, Senator (NH)
1872 – Greeley, newspaper editor	1856 – Fremont, explorer, Senator (CA)
1888 – B. Harrison, Senator (OH)	1860 – Lincoln, House member (IL)
1892 – Cleveland, President	1868 – Seymour, Governor (NY)
1900 – Bryan, ex-presidential candidate	1876 – Tilden, Governor (NY)
1904 – Parker, Judge (NY)	1880 – Hancock, General
1912 – Wilson, Governor (NJ)	1884 – Cleveland, Governor (NY)
1912 – T. Roosevelt, President	1896 – McKinley, Congressman and Governor (OH)
1916 – Hughes, Governor (NY), Supreme Court Justice	1908 – Bryan, ex-presidential candidate
1924 – Davis, House member (WV), diplomat	1920 – Harding, Senator (OH)
1932 – F.D. Roosevelt, Governor (NY)	1928 – Smith, Governor (NY)
1936 – Landon, Governor (KS)	1952 – Eisenhower, General
1940 – Willkie, business leader	1960 – Kennedy, Senator (MA)
1944 – Dewey, Governor (NY)	1968 – Nixon, Vice President
1948 – Dewey, governor (NY)	1988 – Dukakis, Governor (MA)
1956 – Stevenson, Governor (IL), ex-presidential candidate	2000 – G.W. Bush, Governor (TX)
1964 – Goldwater, Senator (AZ)	
1972 – McGovern, Senator (SD)	
1976 – Carter, Governor (GA)	
1980 – Reagan, Governor (CA)	
1984 – Mondale, Vice President	
1992 – W.J. Clinton, Governor (AR)	
1996 – Dole, Senate Majority Leader (KS)	
2004 – Kerry, Senator (MA)	

*Note:* Exhibited for candidates, as of the dates of the relevant elections, are the highest offices or stations they had previously at any time held or attained to. Previous presidential or vice presidential candidates are designated with an “ex-.” Both Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt are listed as challengers for 1912. Omitted are the uncontested elections of 1788, 1792, and 1820 and the all-Democratic-Republican contest of 1824.

testing, but an examination of cases is possible. On exhibit here are incumbents of a generic kind and vintage we would particularly expect to have carried their party’s flag, and if they did not do so it is worth asking why not. Excluded are all vice presidential succeeders since the last election. Notwithstanding the success stories among them, these are often a quirky lot less orthodox and less skilled as politicians than the presidents who reached the White House directly via the ballot and thus pose too many reasons why they might not have ended up carrying the party flag. For the purpose at hand, it is best to have a clear decision rule and omit them all. Thus omitted are John Tyler in 1844, Millard Fillmore in 1852, Andrew Johnson in 1868, Chester Arthur in 1884, Theodore

TABLE 6

*First-term Incumbents Appearing or Not Appearing as Their Party's Candidate again, Ranked According to How Long They Later Lived<sup>a</sup>*

<i>President</i>	<i>Survival Beyond End of First Term</i>		<i>Comments</i>
	<i>Years</i>	<i>Months</i>	
Hoover	31	8	
J. Adams	25	4	
Madison	23	4	
Jefferson	21	4	
Van Buren	21	5	
Nixon	21	3	
Reagan	19	4	
Cleveland	19	4	
J.Q. Adams	19	0	
Taft	17	0	
<u>Pierce</u>	12	7	Dems ditched him, but they won anyway
Grant	12	5	
Jackson	12	3	
Eisenhower	12	2	
<u>Hayes</u>	11	10	Up front, he pledged only one term
Monroe	10	4	
F.D. Roosevelt	8	3	
B. Harrison	8	0	
<u>Buchanan</u>	7	3	Only Reagan was older after one term
Washington	6	9	
Wilson	6	11	
<u>L.B. Johnson</u>	4	0	Uncertain health
<u>Coolidge</u>	3	10	Uncertain health
McKinley	0	6	Assassinated in office
<u>Polk</u>	0	3	Up front, he pledged only one term
Lincoln	0	1	Assassinated in office
Carter	26 as of January 2007		
G.H.W. Bush	14 as of January 2007		
Clinton	10 as of January 2007		
G.W. Bush	2 as of January 2007		

*Note:* Listed here are all incumbent presidents coming up to a reelection juncture who a) had previously been elected president (this excludes never-elected vice presidential successors) and b) had served as president no more than six years (this accommodates Coolidge in 1928 and Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968 but not Theodore Roosevelt in 1908, Truman in 1952, or Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940 or 1944).

<sup>a</sup>Those not appearing as candidates again are underlined.

Roosevelt in 1904, Calvin Coolidge in 1924, Harry Truman in 1948, Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, and Gerald Ford in 1976.

Included in principle in Table 6 are all incumbents previously elected once and nearing the end of their first term. These are presidents who, in the American custom set by George Washington, have been decisively expected to appear as their parties' candidates again. Excluded are all incumbents nearing the end of their *second* term (or beyond that). A strong norm, and then a constitutional amendment, have lodged against reruns by second termers and it

is thus not particularly interesting to ask whether they have appeared as candidates again. A few judgment calls were needed. Excluded here are Theodore Roosevelt as of 1908 and Truman as of 1952. These men were nearing the ends of their *second* terms, more or less, having originally succeeded the deceased William McKinley and Franklin D. Roosevelt in, respectively, 1901 and 1945, and were thus pretty strongly subject to the two-term norm. Finally, Theodore Roosevelt served in the presidency all except six months, and Truman all except three months, of a full two terms. Theodore Roosevelt, in fact, ruled out a 1908 rerun in a public statement at the time of his election victory in 1904. Truman, not formally bound by the then-new Twenty-Second Amendment, although a believer in the two-term norm that that amendment reaffirmed, ruled out a 1952 rerun in a private memo in 1950, although he did later flirt with a repeat candidacy in March 1952 when he ran into trouble collaring Adlai Stevenson as a successor nominee.<sup>47</sup> Included here, however, are Coolidge as of 1928 and Lyndon B. Johnson as of 1968. Having each then served a total of five years as president, originally as vice presidential succeeders before winning elections themselves, these two men were not barred by any norm or rule from running again and were widely expected to do so. They were widely seen as first-termers.

As seen in Table 6, a sizable 24 of the 30 optimally poised incumbents have appeared as their parties' candidates again. That is 80 percent. Running again has been the custom even in many adverse circumstances. What are the six exceptions? Franklin Pierce, sized up by his party in 1856 as a weak reelection prospect, is still the only previously elected president ever denied renomination.<sup>48</sup> His party substituted James Buchanan and kept the White House with a 12-point election edge. For the argument here, it is not entirely clear what to make of that. James K. Polk pledged himself to one term as apparently the price of his Democratic nomination in 1844; other ambitious candidates or factions in the party wanted the slate clean for 1848.<sup>49</sup> Rutherford B. Hayes pledged himself to one term at the time of being nominated in 1876; that was a

<sup>47</sup> Truman wrote in his 1950 memo: "In my opinion eight years as President is enough and sometimes too much for any man to serve in that capacity. There is a lure in power. It can get into a man's blood just as gambling and lust for money have been known to do. This is a Republic.... I want this country to continue as a Republic. Cincinnatus and Washington pointed the way.... When we forget the examples of such men as Washington, Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson, all of whom could have had a continuation in office, then will we start down the road to dictatorship and ruin. I know I could be elected again and continue to break the old precedent as it was broken by F.D.R. It should not be done." Truman's staff quickly talked him out of his flirtation in 1952. See Harold F. Gosnell, *Truman's Crises* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1980), 507–510, quotation at p. 507; Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: A Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 376; Cabell Phillips, *The Truman Presidency* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 414–419; Donald R. McCoy, *The Presidency of Harry S. Truman* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984), 300–301.

<sup>48</sup> Roy R. Nichols, *Franklin Pierce* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1958), 452.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Sellers, "Election of 1844" in Schlesinger, ed., *History of American Presidential Elections*, vol. I, 747–861.

high-minded reform stance in those days.<sup>50</sup> As for Buchanan, it is true that both his party and his country were crashing around him as he neared the end of his term in 1859–60. It is hard to envision a scenario that would have kept him in the White House. It also seems true that he was worn out: “I am in my 69<sup>th</sup> year and am heartily tired of my position as president.”<sup>51</sup>

That leaves Coolidge in 1928 and Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968. In these two cases, health concerns intrude. In Table 6, as a roundabout clue to health fitness at the junctures when the 30 incumbent presidents needed to decide whether to run again, I have ranked them according to how long they kept on living—regardless of whether they ran again or were elected again—after the closing dates of their first full terms in office. At the extremes (disregarding assassinations), Hoover carried on for nearly a third of a century after March 1933; Polk died three months after leaving office in March 1849. Note the bottom sector of the table. Regarding 1928, it is a near certainty that Coolidge would have won another term if he had gone for it, yet evidently a suspicion by both him and his wife that something was seriously wrong with him helped drive a decision to retire. He died of coronary thrombosis at age 61 in January 1933, two months short of completing what would have been another term.<sup>52</sup> In 1968, of course, the political environment differed starkly. Johnson, with the Vietnam War going badly and his polls down, had abundant reason to reach for a Senator Tribble–like exit. But Johnson was also a physical wreck by that time. A heart condition, infection, repeated surgery, and exhaustion had worn him down. He had ordered a secret actuarial study of his own life in 1967. He doubted he could survive another four years in office.<sup>53</sup> Through a twist of

<sup>50</sup> Ari Hoogenboom, *Rutherford B. Hayes* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 266–267.

<sup>51</sup> Philip S. Klein, *President James Buchanan: A Biography* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962), 332, 340, quotation, which appeared in a letter from Buchanan to the wife of ex-President James K. Polk, at 340. On the subject of presidential service, there is a tradition of treating the immediate antebellum decades as a time apart: “This was an era of one-term Presidencies and of frequent rejection of the President as party leader. The Whig platform of 1844 advocated a one-term limit. James K. Polk announced that he would not be a candidate for a second term; Franklin Pierce tried for the nomination and failed. James Buchanan found it expedient not to make the effort. The four-year limitation was accepted in principle to the point where Horace Greeley could use it electorally as a substantial argument against the re-nomination of Abraham Lincoln in 1864. With Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant, however, the two-term tradition was restored.” Paul T. David, Ralph M. Goldman, and Richard C. Bain, *The Politics of National Party Conventions* (Washington DC: Brookings, 1960), 13–14. Perhaps a one-term norm did obtain for a while. On the other hand, these are small numbers. We might not be entertaining any such case if just one domineering politician on the order of Andrew Jackson had come along around 1850.

<sup>52</sup> Donald R. McCoy, *Calvin Coolidge: The Quiet President* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 389–390, 412; Claude M. Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge: The Man from Vermont* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1940), 392–401, 458–464.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961–1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 519–530 on Johnson’s decision whether to run again, 522–523, 526–529 specifically on the health considerations. See also Irwin Unger and Debi Unger, *LBJ: A Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1999), 439–441, 458–459; Randall B. Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*

causation, as it happens, Johnson might have actually *hastened* his own death by retiring in 1968 and thus casting off certain constraints of office. He took to drinking more, smoking more, and eating rich foods. Whatever the exact causal path, he suffered a coronary setback in March 1970 and an incapacitating heart attack in June 1972, and died on 22 January 1973—just two days after an additional term would have ended.<sup>54</sup> In Johnson in 1968, we have an instance of joint or over-determination. At the least, both very bad political tidings and very bad health drove his decision to retire. Both Coolidge and Johnson in additional terms of office might have collapsed from command as did Woodrow Wilson in 1919.

### DISCUSSION

To return to the six categories of Table 3, I do not believe that category five (incumbent party fatigue) and category six (strategic behavior) do much to illuminate the disparity between the two-thirds and one-half success rates scored by in-office presidential parties. As regards in-party strategic behavior, accepting the test conditions of Table 6, only the cases of Buchanan in 1860 and Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968 seem to nudge in the predicted direction. The case of the seven-year incumbent Truman in 1952, another Democrat who folded in a bad year for that party, is worth pondering. But the withdrawal decisions in all three of these cases were cloudily and multiply determined.

It seems a good bet that the gap between the two-thirds and one-half fractions owes chiefly to some mix of categories one through four—that is, factors that easily draw the term “incumbency advantage” in its explanatory sense plus the innate superior talent (prizefighters) account. Given an immense data universe, these distinctions might be sorted out. Category one (capabilities that come with the office) and most of the voter considerations listed under category three (that is, risk-averseness, perceived start-up costs, and optimal contract) might apply equally to all incumbents running again regardless of how they reached the White House in the first place. Category two (previous campaign experience) and category three’s factor of voter inertia might downplay the vice presidential successors. Category four (prizefighters) might predict a cascade of next-time success rates, depending on whether incumbents won the presidential office initially by a knockout (as with Jackson in 1828, Reagan in 1980), in more or less a draw (Kennedy in 1960, George W. Bush in 2000), in a multicandidate free-for-all (Abraham Lincoln in 1860, Wilson in 1912), or through vice presidential succession. There is an additional consideration. Perhaps the electorate can be expected to exact an illegitimacy penalty next time

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(New York: Free Press, 2006), 767–768, 817. The actuarial study predicted death at age 64. In fact, Johnson died at age 64 and a half.

<sup>54</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 602, 605, 619–622. See also Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*, 882–884.

against candidates who won, or more precisely are perceived to have won, the White House via the electoral college though lacking a popular-vote edge. In American history, the instances of incumbents running again carrying this baggage have been John Quincy Adams in 1828, Benjamin Harrison in 1892, and George W. Bush in 2004. The instances are suggestive, but the number is small.

But distinctions like these cannot be sorted out on current evidence. The vice presidential succeeders, for example, have been far too few to allow much leverage. Perhaps an analysis of state governorship elections would offer leverage. Yet caution is advisable. Governors do not conduct wars or manage foreign policy crises, and they do not command the attention or resources that presidents do. Differences like these might bear on the categories of explanation offered here in Table 3. For example, voter risk averseness might play a different role regarding officials who do not have a nuclear button to press.

To restate the basic finding, parties during American history have kept the presidency roughly two-thirds of the time when they have run incumbent candidates but only exactly half the time when they have not. If this disparity is real—in the senses I have been fishing for it to be here—it might bear interpretive implications for the past as well as tidings for the future.

In particular, long eras of rock-solid party hegemony are often discerned in the American past, but they might not have been that. Incumbency advantage might have been at work. Only three times in American history, it is interesting to note, has a party managed to field incumbent presidential candidates two or more times in a row. The last of these instances, Ford's incumbent candidacy in 1976 following on Watergate in 1973–74 and Nixon's incumbent candidacy in 1972, is hardly an advertisement for incumbency advantage. Nixon in 1972 and Ford in 1976 were the two consecutive election-facing incumbents of the same party, and Ford lost. Yet the first instance, the back-to-back candidacies of the incumbents McKinley in 1900 and Theodore Roosevelt in 1904, which are customarily seen to have helped forge a party era, may also show the Republicans, in effect, lucking out.

Most spectacular, of course, has been the sequence of four incumbent candidacies featuring Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936, 1940, and 1944 and Truman in 1948. Nothing like that sequence, which brought unbroken victory for the in-office Democrats, had ever happened before or is likely to happen again. The last three of these elections raise a particular point. Of all the recipes for an incumbent candidate's office-induced edge, possibly nothing tops that of an experienced Commander in Chief managing a military crisis. Several motifs of Table 3 can come into play: adept uses of executive power (as when Roosevelt upstaged the Republicans by appointing that party's eminences Frank Knox and Henry Stimson to national security positions in his cabinet in June 1940), accrued incumbent skills, valence issue positioning, voter risk averseness, and a perception of start-up costs for a new administration.

That package seems to have been the story of the 1940 election. The spring and summer of 1940, as the Nazis conquered France and menaced Britain, brought an immense security threat to the American state. Previous to this threat, credible testimony suggests, Roosevelt had not leaned toward running again.<sup>55</sup> In the face of it, he thought he ought to, and public support surged in his favor as France fell. In their well-known Erie County panel study conducted in 1940, the Columbia researchers Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet found that “the first influence on the changers [that is, voters changing their minds] as a whole came in June, with the fall of France. The repercussions of that turn in the European war were strongly favorable to the Democrats. Of the people who definitely decided their vote in June, two-thirds decided for the Democrats, mainly on the ground that the European crisis necessitated the continuance of an experienced administration in Washington.”<sup>56</sup>

It is true that Roosevelt had won a steady, decent job approval rating in the mid-50s to low-60s range during 1939 and early 1940,<sup>57</sup> yet he had ordinarily polled poorly when respondents were asked if they would vote for him for a third term. Now, in May and June of 1940, the third-term difficulty vanished. The answer to the third-term question became yes—by a double-digit edge.<sup>58</sup> Also in May 1940, a chronic single-digit edge that Roosevelt had enjoyed over Thomas E. Dewey, the early Republican favorite for presidential nominee, surged to a 20-point edge.<sup>59</sup> In June, once the Republicans nominated the practiced executive Wendell Willkie instead of Dewey, Roosevelt assumed a

<sup>55</sup> On FDR’s decision, see Kenneth S. Davis, *FDR: Into the Storm, 1937-1940* (New York: Random House, 1993), 532–535, 584–586; Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: Rendezvous with Destiny* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1990), 327–328, 341, 346. See also Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), 169–173, quotation at 169: “It is safe to say that, if there had been no international crisis, he would not have run....”

<sup>56</sup> Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People’s Choice*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 71.

<sup>57</sup> Gallup Poll data available at the Roper Center’s iPOLL Databank. FDR’s readings during this time span were generally in that range if the denominators are allowed to include “no opinion” responses. For an analysis covering the era, see Matthew A. Baum and Samuel Kernell, “Economic Class and Popular Support for Franklin Roosevelt in War and Peace,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 65 (Summer 2001): 198–229.

<sup>58</sup> The third-term time series, which includes chiefly Gallup polls, is available at the Roper Center’s iPOLL Databank. Roosevelt’s biographer, James MacGregor Burns, has written: “As the crisis deepened, Roosevelt’s popular backing mounted strongly. Millions of Americans forgot their concern for the third-term tradition as they instinctively rallied behind their leader against the trouble outside.” See James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), 422. In Roper surveys in August and September of 1940, 47 percent and 50 percent, respectively, of respondents chose the option “While it may not generally be a good idea for a president to serve three terms, there should be no rule preventing him at a time of national crisis,” against the options of, essentially, a third term bar is a silly idea (15 percent and 16 percent) or third terms should never be allowed (34 percent and 30 percent). Data available at the Roper Center’s iPOLL Databank.

<sup>59</sup> The Roosevelt versus Dewey time series is from Hadley Cantril, *Public Opinion, 1935-1946* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951), 650.

modest edge over Willkie and kept it into November, yet it seems to have been chiefly a foreign policy edge. In July, for example, a verdict went 54 to 27 percent to Roosevelt on the survey question: “Which presidential candidate do you think would handle our country’s foreign affairs better, Roosevelt or Willkie?”<sup>60</sup> Yet in October, a verdict went 53 to 47 percent to Willkie on the question: “If there were no war in Europe, which presidential candidate would you vote for, Roosevelt or Willkie?”<sup>61</sup> If Roosevelt had retired in 1940, it seems a plausible conclusion that the election that year would have receded into a toss-up contest.<sup>62</sup> Just before the Democrats did re-nominate Roosevelt in July, one survey result favored the Republicans by 35.7 to 33.7 percent—basically a tie—on the question: “If Roosevelt does not run for re-election, which party do you think you would be most likely to vote for, as you feel now?”<sup>63</sup> As important as anything in 1940, the Democrats had not groomed a plan-B nominee. No one stood out as especially electable. In survey matchups during 1939 and early 1940, the Republican Dewey had dominated Democratic hopefuls James Farley, Harry Hopkins, Henry Wallace, and Paul McNutt and run roughly even against Vice President John Nance Garner and Secretary of State Cordell Hull—until May 1940, that is, when the 68-year-old Hull surged to a 10-point lead during the European crisis for possibly the same in-office reason as Roosevelt.<sup>64</sup> Beyond Roosevelt, the Party’s prospects were blurry.

Crisis management would not go away. Four years later, the ongoing war dominated the election of 1944. The election of 1948 is often romanticized as a succession of Truman’s whistle-stops and give-’em-hell speeches, but in fact it took place during the scary—we have forgotten just how scary—Berlin crisis of that year, which the incumbent president seemed to be managing well.<sup>65</sup> Casually we write of a long-continuing New Deal era, but on the political side, the 1940s were a good deal dicier than that. Incumbency probably aided the Democrats. There was not any long rock-solid hegemonic party era. Tweak the contingencies a bit and we might be writing of an Age of Willkie or an Age of Dewey.\*

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., item 62 (Office of Public Opinion Research Survey), 617.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., item 76 (American Institute of Public Opinion Survey), 618.

<sup>62</sup> See the discussions in Robert A. Divine, *Foreign Policy and U.S. Presidential Elections: 1940, 1948* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974), chaps. 1, 2; Michael Barone, *Our Country: The Shaping of America from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 133–134, 145, 156, 181.

<sup>63</sup> Cantril, *Public Opinion*, item 59 (Fortune Survey), 617. An announced caveat: “Southern Negroes were omitted in this tabulation because their franchise is largely ineffective.”

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., items 15 (AIPO), 607; 18 (AIPO), 609; 21 (AIPO), 609, 31 (AIPO), 613; 16 (AIPO), 608; 17 (AIPO), 608.

<sup>65</sup> See Divine, *Foreign Policy*, chaps. 5–7.

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