

**Party, Performance, and Strategic Politicians:
The Dynamics of Elections for Senator and Governor in 2006**

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Abstract

This paper analyzes a unique set of state-level monthly survey data covering the eighteen months preceding the 2006 election to estimate (1) the effects of national and local conditions on the strength of challenges to incumbent senators and governors and (2) the effects of these challenges on changes in state electorates' ratings of officeholders and their share of votes on election day. The analysis confirms several of the basic components of the theory that the strategic behavior of candidates and campaign contributors amplify the effects of local and national conditions on election results, thereby enhancing electoral accountability. But it also uncovers a striking difference between the two offices: even taking the strongly pro-Democratic national climate into account, the election context had a strong tendency to reduce the approval ratings of Senators, while it had an equally strong tendency to increase the approval ratings of governors. We speculate as to what might account for this difference.

Regular elections are, among other things, supposed to enable ordinary citizens to hold elected leaders responsible, individually and collectively, for their performance in office. The prospect of reelection thereby gives leaders an incentive to work to satisfy citizens because unsatisfactory service can be and, on the occasion, will be punished by loss of office. It is now widely understood that, at least in the United States, strategically-minded politicians and activists play a pivotal part in making this process work. Partisans aspiring to replace the current incumbents are strongly motivated to monitor their performance and to report any malfeasance they detect to an otherwise rationally ignorant electorate. They are also acutely sensitive to the electoral opportunities that the individual or collective shortcomings of those in power may present. The better the prospects of replacing the incumbent member or party, the more likely talented and ambitious politicians are to take the field against them, and, because parties and campaign contributors also behave strategically, the more resources these superior candidates will have at their disposal if they do. Decisions about running for office or financing candidacies determine the options available to voters on election day—whether, for example, the alternative to a familiar incumbent is a qualified replacement with the resources to communicate effective arguments for change, or an obscure figure of unknown ability or purpose. Because voters are disinclined to support candidates in the latter category, the electorate’s ability to act as “a rational god of vengeance and reward” when disenchanted with current leaders depends, at least in part, on an assist from strategic politicians and associated partisan activists.¹

Although the connections between electoral expectations, the quality of candidates, the vigor of their campaigns, and election results are well documented (Jacobson 2004), our understanding of the processes forging these connections rests more on inference than on direct observation. We know that incumbents who seem vulnerable for any reason are likely to attract serious opposition and that serious opposition usually costs them votes and, less frequently, their jobs. But the causal dynamics are not fully understood: How and when is vulnerability assessed? How do local and national circumstances combine to shape electoral expectations? To what extent do strong challengers simply ride a favorable partisan tide, and

¹ The phrase is V.O. Key’s (1964, 567); the literature on strategic candidacies and their electoral effects includes Jacobson and Kernell (1983); Jacobson (1989, 2004); Bond, Covington, and Fleisher (1985); Bond, Fleisher, and Talbert (1997); Canon (1993); Fowler and McClure (1989); Kazee (1994); Krasno (1994); Lublin (1994); Maestas, et al. (2006); Maisel and Stone (1997), Squire (1989, 1992); and Westlye (1991).

to what extent do they help create the tide? How do their campaigns matter, and for which voters? How do these processes vary across offices? In this paper, we exploit a unique set of data covering an unusual election cycle—2005-2006—to gain insights into these and other questions normally left in something of an analytical black box in literature on strategic politicians.

The Data and the Setting

Between May 2005 and November 2006, SurveyUSA, a polling firm whose main clients for its political surveys are local news media, conducted monthly statewide polls in all 50 states. Their automated telephone surveys asked samples of approximately 600 respondents in each state if they approved of the performance of G.W. Bush, the state's governor, and both of its senators, as well as questions about each respondent's party identification, ideology, religious-service attendance, and demographic characteristics (age, education, sex, race, and in some states, region). In some months they also asked respondents' positions on policy issues. The aggregate results, including breakdowns of the approval questions by all of the respondents' other characteristics, were posted on the internet shortly after the each survey was taken.² These data, if reliable, obviously have great potential value for addressing questions about the dynamics of state-level electoral politics during the 2005-2006 cycle. We thus examined the survey results carefully for internal and external consistency as well as intuitive plausibility, and they passed all of the tests very satisfactorily (Jacobson 2006, Brown 2007). The analyses we present here also provide something of a check on the plausibility of these data, and again the results, we believe, strongly reinforce our confidence in their accuracy and utility.

The SUSA data give us a measure of the public standing of every incumbent senator and governor who sought reelection in 2006 beginning more than 18 months before the election. They also document the trends in the approval ratings of each over the entire period leading up to election day. We can thus examine how an incumbent's standing with constituents well before the election season begins affects the kind of opposition they attract when they run for reelection, and we can track the effects, if any, of that opposition on their approval ratings and on their ultimate electoral fates. Because the approval data can be

² The data can be accessed at <http://www.surveyusa.com/50StateTracking.html>.

broken down by party identification, we can also test for variations in campaign effects across partisan subgroups. In short, these data offer a unique window into how one important factor shaping the expectations of potential challengers and their potential allies—the incumbent’s personal standing with constituents—affects strategic behavior, and how their strategic choices affect subsequent popular opinion and behavior.

Electoral expectations are shaped by both local and national conditions. The 2006 midterm election is especially useful for assessing strategic responses to national conditions because the potential for a strong pro-Democratic national tide was unmistakable early on. Republican President George W. Bush’s job approval rating had declined steadily through most of 2005 and averaged less than 40 percent during the final quarter of the year.³ Only Richard Nixon had lower ratings leading into a midterm election year, and if Bush did not rebound, his party could certainly expect to suffer. Moreover, the main source of unhappiness with the president, the course of the Iraq War, offered little basis for optimism, so a turnaround was unlikely (and did not, in fact, occur; Bush’s average approval in twenty-five national polls taken during the month before the election was 37 percent). The Republican-controlled Congress was even less popular than Bush; its Republican members not only shared blame for the war, but several were tainted by scandal, notably those who had questionable financial dealings with convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Despite a generally strong economy, by the end of 2005 nearly two-thirds of Americans polled were reporting dissatisfaction with the country’s direction.⁴ In short, if Democrats could not find promise in the political climate prevailing during the period when decisions about 2006 candidacies and campaign investments were taking shape, it is hard to imagine when they would. Thus the 2006 elections allow us to assess the effect of national conditions on strategic behavior with no uncertainty about the partisan thrust of national forces.

The unambiguous pro-Democratic national environment and our state-level survey data allow us to compare the effects of national and local circumstances on state as well as national politicians. We already know that governors can insulate themselves from national political conflicts more readily than can senators and that views of their performance tend to be less polarized along party lines (Jacobson 2006). They are more likely to serve in states

³ Calculated from 33 national polls covering the period reported at <http://www.pollingreport.com/BushJob.htm>, accessed January 15, 2007.

⁴ See <http://www.pollingreport.com/right.htm>, accessed May 23, 2007.

where their party is in the minority (42 percent of the governors in office in 2006 served in states won by the opposite party's presidential candidate in 2004, compared with 25 percent of senators). Although historically, state-level election outcomes have also reflected national partisan tides (Holbrook-Provow 1987, Chubb 1988; Leyden and Borelli 1995, Carsey and Wright 1998), the linkages may not be as strong or develop in the same way as in congressional elections. It seems plausible that governors would be evaluated by somewhat different criteria than national legislators; opinions on President Bush and the Iraq War, for example, might not play as strong a role in shaping voters' evaluations of them and their challengers. It seems plausible that local conditions would be relatively more important in shaping strategic decisions regarding contests for governor than for senator, but we do not really know; the SUSA data allow us to investigate this and related questions.

Senators: Basic Data

The basic data on the twenty-nine incumbent senators seeking reelection in 2006 appears in Table 1. The table divides the senators by party and lists them in rank order of their average approval ratings in the SUSA surveys take over the seven months from May through December, 2005.⁵ The choice of months over which to measure pre-election approval ratings is somewhat arbitrary but unproblematic, as analysis of any reasonable alternative subset of months from this period produces substantively equivalent results. The table also lists their average September-October 2006 approval rates, the change from the earlier period, the share of major-party votes they won in November, and the backgrounds and finances of their challengers.

Even in this undigested form, the data reveal several striking patterns that support central components of the strategic politicians theory:

1. Approval ratings in 2005 are highly correlated with election results in 2006. The simple correlation for Republicans is a remarkable .96, for Democrats, .77, and overall, .87.
2. The lower the initial ratings, the stronger the opposition, particularly for the Republican incumbent. The six Republican incumbents with early approval ratings below 60 percent eventually faced opponents with financial resources exceeding \$9 million. Four of

⁵ Approval is calculated as the percent approving of the senator as a proportion of approvers plus disapprovers; results do not change if approval is calculated from total respondents, including those with no opinions.

Table 1. Incumbent Senators' Approval Ratings, Challenges, and Electoral Fates

<i>State</i>	<i>Republicans</i>	<i>May-Dec. 2005 Approval</i>	<i>Sept.-Oct. 2006 Approval</i>	<i>Change in Approval</i>	<i>2006 Vote</i>	<i>Opponent's Political Experience</i>	<i>Spending by and for Incumbent</i>	<i>Spending by and for Challenger</i>	<i>Incumbent Spending per Voting-age Resident</i>	<i>Challenger Spending per Voting-age Resident</i>
ME	Snowe	78.0	76.4	-1.6	78.2	None	\$2,793,541	\$126,823	2.63	.12
IN	Lugar	69.8	68.5	-1.3	100.0	No opponent	\$3,133,880		.66	
WY	Thomas	67.7	68.2	0.5	70.1	None	\$1,450,121	\$141,164	3.56	.29
MS	Lott	67.6	69.1	1.5	64.6	State leg.	\$2,088,465	\$38,949	.97	.02
TX	Hutchison	67.2	65.6	-1.7	63.1	None	\$5,734,148	\$1,432,107	.34	.08
UT	Hatch	66.0	63.0	-3.0	67.0	None	\$3,340,902	\$256,010	1.90	.15
VA	Allen	61.0	52.2	-8.8	49.8	Navy sec.	\$20,237,071	\$15,524,297	3.47	2.66
NV	Ensign	60.8	58.5	-2.3	57.5	None	\$4,462,855	\$2,264,708	2.40	1.21
AZ	Kyl	57.9	49.2	-8.7	55.1	None	\$16,218,584	\$16,319,075	3.57	3.60
RI	Chaffee	57.7	50.5	-7.2	46.5	State AG	\$6,961,983	\$9,432,628	8.39	11.36
MO	Talent	56.4	49.5	-6.9	48.8	State auditor	\$25,340,762	\$23,106,683	5.73	5.23
MT	Burns	54.3	40.2	-14.2	49.6	St. sen. pres.	\$9,382,028	\$9,857,596	12.91	13.56
OH	DeWine	52.2	43.3	-8.9	43.8	U.S. rep	\$21,333,148	\$18,177,755	2.45	2.08
PA	Santorum	50.0	41.2	-8.8	41.3	St. treasurer	\$26,830,527	\$17,950,167	2.78	1.86
	<i>Democrats</i>									
ND	Conrad	73.7	77.8	4.0	70.0	Town council	\$3,592,982	\$259,081	7.31	.53
DE	Carper	72.2	65.4	-6.8	71.0	None	\$2,632,603	\$212,765	4.05	.33
NE	Ben Nelson	69.8	65.6	-4.2	63.9	None	\$7,921,876	\$13,447,496	5.99	10.16
HA	Akaka	67.9	51.6	-16.3	62.5	St. leg.	\$2,951,220	\$356,413	2.99	.36
NM	Bingaman	67.1	64.4	-2.7	70.6	None	\$2,628,460	\$555,511	1.82	.38
WV	Byrd	66.4	64.9	-1.5	65.7	None	\$5,110,941	\$3,147,967	3.58	2.20
NY	Clinton	65.5	66.7	1.2	68.4	Mayor	\$34,368,867	\$5,805,185	2.32	.39
MA	Kennedy	63.3	62.1	-1.2	69.4	Selectman	\$7,043,052	\$858,518	1.41	.17
WI	Kohl	63.0	66.1	3.1	69.5	None	\$6,347,126	\$176,987	1.50	.04
FL	Bill Nelson	61.3	52.4	-8.9	61.3	U.S. rep/sec. st.	\$16,199,945	\$9,380,293	1.15	.67
CA	Feinstein	60.2	60.4	0.2	62.8	St. leg.	\$8,031,043	\$196,865	.30	.01
WA	Cantwell	59.1	55.1	-3.9	58.7	None	\$14,165,151	\$10,922,848	2.91	2.24
MI	Stabenow	56.2	56.0	-0.1	58.0	Sheriff	\$11,308,148	\$7,425,903	1.48	.97
NJ	Menendez	54.1	46.6	-7.5	54.6	St. leg.	\$18,978,821	\$11,906,091	2.86	1.79
CT	Lieberman	69.7	52.4	-17.3	49.7	None/st.leg.	\$17,210,170	\$20,614,415	6.40	7.67

the six were opposed by candidates who had held statewide office (if we count the presidency of a state senate in this category) and a fifth by a U.S. representative. Among Democrats, the effects of early ratings on the strength of challenges is weaker; only one (Bill Nelson) was challenged by candidate who had ever held statewide office, and only a few faced well-financed opponents (Joseph Lieberman, who lost his primary but won reelection as an independent, is of course a special case).

3. Among Republicans, the lower the initial approval rating, the more the rating declined during the campaign—exactly opposite the “regression toward the mean” we would expect to observe if nothing systematic (for example, the formidable challenges they attracted) were affecting their ratings. The correlation between initial ratings and the magnitude of change is .79. Thus the stronger challenges incurred by Republicans with low initial job approval ratings seem to have pushed them even lower. Among Democrats, change in approval is unrelated to initial approval.

4. Differences between the parties suggest that national conditions interacted with local conditions to shape candidacies and outcomes; Democrats generally avoided formidable opposition regardless of local standing, reflecting the prevailing pro-Democratic national climate. Republicans did not.

A more detailed examination of the data reinforces these interpretations. Figure 1 displays the relationships between senators’ job approval ratings in 2005 and their share of votes in the 2006 election. As noted, the former predict the latter for both parties with considerable accuracy, but the slopes and intercepts differ significantly by party (see Table 2). Most Democrats, and all Democrats with initial approval ratings below 65 percent, received a share of votes at least as high as their 2005 approval level. Ten of the fourteen Republicans won a smaller share of votes than of 2005 approvers, and the lower their initial approval, the more they tended to fall below the dashed 45-degree line at which 2006 vote shares equal 2005 approval.⁶

⁶ Richard Lugar (unopposed) and Joseph Lieberman (lost the Democratic primary and won the general election as an independent) are omitted from this part of the analysis.

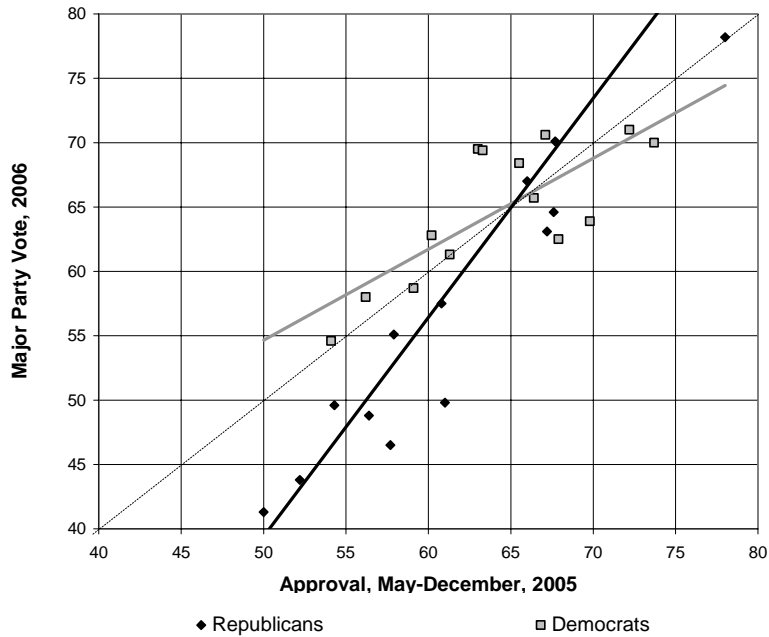
Table 2. Regression of the 2006 Senate Vote on 2005 Approval

	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>
Democratic Incumbent	4.89**	1.55	47.81***	9.35
2005 Approval	1.13***	.10	1.39***	.08
Democratic incumbent X 2005 Approval			-.68***	.15
Constant	-12.8*	6.20	-28.44***	4.81
R ²	.83		.88	
Number of cases	27		27	

Note: The dependent variable is the incumbents share of the major party vote; robust standard errors.

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

Figure 1. Approval Ratings in 2005 and the Vote for Senate Incumbents in 2006



Governors: Basic Data

Table 3 presents the comparable basic data for incumbent governors who sought reelection in 2006. Again, they are separated by party and listed in descending order of their average approval ratings for May through December, 2005.⁷ The table suggests some

⁷ Though Alaska’s Murkowski also sought reelection, he lost his primary and is therefore omitted.

patterns similar to those we observed for senators, but also shows some noteworthy differences:

1. As with senators, 2005 approval ratings are firmly linked to election results, although the correlations are not as strong. For governors overall, the correlation is .58; for Democrats alone it is .81, for Republicans .54, and for Republicans without Schwarzenegger, a notable outlier, .66.

2. Also as with senators, low approval in 2005 led to more formidable challengers in 2006. Five of the eight Republicans with average 2005 approval below 60 percent faced challengers with statewide experience and a sixth (Ehrlich) attracted the exceptionally well-funded mayor of his state's largest city. Only one Democrat was challenged by a statewide officeholder, but four of the seven with 2005 ratings below 60 percent faced well-financed opponents.⁸ The spending figures here run lower than for the Senate campaigns, but remember that the Senate number include independent spending by outside groups. More important, the financial data for governors are still incomplete, as final figures are not yet available for every state.

3. On the whole, governors receive lower approval ratings from constituents than do senators. No senator averaged less than 50 percent approval during the last seven months of 2005, while eight of the governors fell below this mark; on average, governors were rated 4.6 percentage points lower than senators. On the other hand, low ratings were not nearly so dangerous to governors; none who were rated below 50 percent in either 2005 or in late 2006 lost (the one loser, Ehrlich, was rated a little above 50 percent in both periods)

4. In contrast to Republican senators, there is no evidence that Republican governors with lower initial ratings systematically suffered a further decline over the election year; rather we find evidence of a regression toward the mean (the correlation is -.57 between the two periods across this set of incumbents).

5. The national pro-Democratic tide running in 2006 did not leave gubernatorial elections untouched, but its impact was the same for incumbents of both parties. This is evident from results of the regressions in Table 4 and the data in Figure 2. The interaction term between party and 2005 approval was not significant and destroyed the precision of

⁸ It should be noted that Granholm's challenger contributed \$35 million to his own campaign.

Table 3. Incumbent Governors' Approval Ratings, Challenges, and Electoral Fates

<i>State</i>	<i>Republicans</i>	<i>May-Dec 2005 Approval</i>	<i>Sep-Oct 2006 Approval</i>	<i>Change in Approval</i>	<i>2006 Major Party Vote</i>	<i>Opponent's Political Experience</i>	<i>Contributions to Incumbent</i>	<i>Contributions to Challenger</i>	<i>Incumbent Cont. per VAP</i>	<i>Challenger Cont. per VAP</i>
CT	Rell	79.8	73.8	-5.9	64.1	New Haven Mayor	\$4,052,687	\$4,163,548	1.58	1.62
SD	Rounds	78.7	66.8	-11.9	63.3	State representative	\$2,209,632	\$753,679	4.00	1.37
NE	Heineman	71.4	75.0	3.6	75.0	None	\$3,431,257	\$325,963	2.72	0.26
VT	Douglas	69.5	63.1	-6.5	57.8	State senate	\$664,141	\$420,000	1.44	.91
HI	Lingle	65.0	72.0	7.0	63.9	State senate whip	\$4,022,983	\$348,670	4.39	0.38
GA	Perdue	58.3	66.1	7.9	60.2	Lt. Governor	\$11,850,187	\$8,392,394	1.97	1.39
RI	Carcieri	57.7	57.1	-0.6	51.0	Lt. Governor	\$2,029,432	\$1,593,602	2.53	1.99
SC	Sanford	56.0	61.3	5.3	55.2	State senate	\$6,107,725	\$1,174,781	2.03	0.39
MN	Pawlenty	53.5	52.7	-0.8	50.5	State attorney general	\$4,181,687	\$2,815,352	1.15	0.77
MD	Ehrlich	51.9	51.3	-0.6	46.7	Baltimore Mayor	\$13,054,637	\$12,456,868	3.31	3.16
AL	Riley	50.9	57.0	6.1	58.0	Lt. Governor	\$12,226,461	\$3,003,926	3.68	0.90
TX	Perry	46.3	44.4	-1.9	56.7	Houston Council; House	\$20,199,539	\$7,359,018	1.35	0.49
CA	Schwarzenegger	36.6	45.3	8.7	58.9	State treasurer	\$46,033,016	\$32,475,733	1.87	1.32
<i>Democrats</i>										
WY	Freudenthal	72.4	73.9	1.5	70.0	None	\$1,045,411	\$446,122	2.86	1.22
NH	Lynch	70.9	78.3	7.4	74.1	State representative	\$436,660	\$486,200	0.47	0.52
OK	Henry	65.4	75.0	9.6	66.5	U.S. House	\$4,820,979	\$1,724,566	1.88	0.67
AZ	Napolitano	63.6	61.7	-1.9	63.8	None	\$1,601,218	\$1,374,313	0.42	0.36
KS	Sebelius	62.1	66.0	3.8	58.9	State senate	\$5,505,463	\$1,253,786	2.78	0.63
NM	Richardson	60.7	71.1	10.4	68.8	None	\$9,484,001	\$627,798	7.23	0.48
TN	Bredesen	54.0	66.3	12.3	69.8	State senate whip	\$5,323,533	\$1,308,270	1.24	0.30
WI	Doyle	48.9	50.0	1.1	53.8	U.S. House	\$2,887,866	\$6,836,427	0.72	1.71
PA	Rendell	48.7	60.6	11.9	60.4	None	\$27,141,430	\$13,017,192	2.90	1.39
OR	Kulongoski	46.1	39.9	-6.3	54.3	Portland school board	\$5,044,578	\$8,270,504	1.96	3.21
IL	Blagojevich	41.6	42.7	1.1	55.9	State treasurer	\$13,315,142	\$5,557,121	1.45	0.61
ME	Baldacci	40.9	44.8	3.9	55.8	Asst state senate leader	\$722,315	\$400,420	0.74	0.41
MI	Granholtm	40.9	41.5	0.6	57.1	None	\$19,940,491	\$42,543,734	2.71	5.79

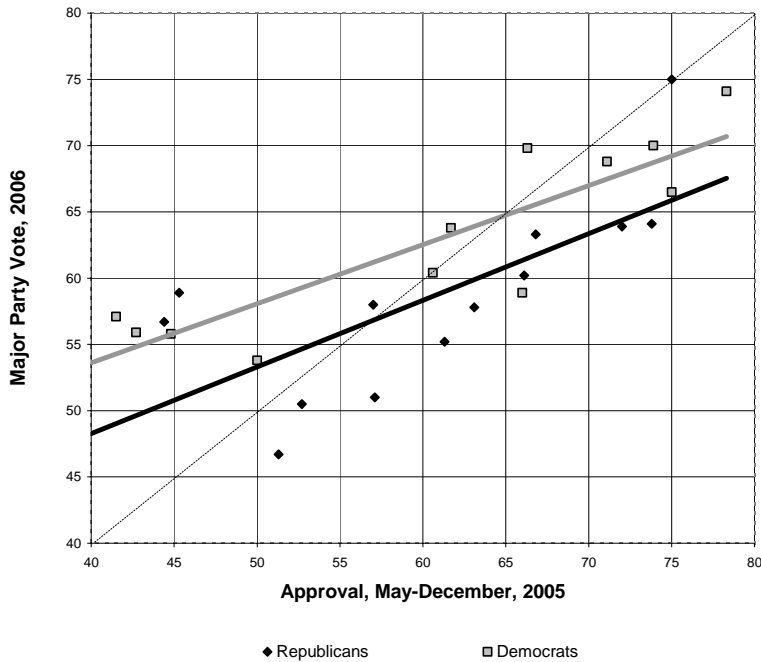
Table 4. Regression of the 2006 Vote for Incumbent Governors on 2005 Approval

	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>
Democratic Incumbent	5.48**	2.36
2005 Approval	.39***	.10
Constant	35.08***	6.17
R ²	.48	
Number of cases	26	

Note: The dependent variable is the incumbent's share of the major party vote in 2006; robust standard errors

p<.01; *p<.001.

Figure 2. Approval Ratings in 2005 and the Vote for Incumbent Governors in 2006



the other estimates (through multicollinearity) so it is omitted from this analysis. Controlling for early approval, Democratic incumbents could expect to win 5.5 points more of the vote than Republican incumbents. Notice also that the relationship between 2005 approval and the 2006 vote is considerably flatter for governors (regression coefficient of .39) than senators (1.39 for Republicans, .71 for Democrats). Again, governors are able to do quite well on election day despite comparatively weak approval ratings.

Strategic Decisions: Senators' Challengers

How did 2005 approval ratings affect strategic decisions regarding candidacies and money in 2006? As mentioned already, the backgrounds of the challengers to senators and governors in 2006 did reflect both the local and national strategic environments, with lower-rated incumbents—particularly on the Republican side—attracting more prominent challengers. For a more systematic analysis of strategic behavior, we use campaign finance data as our proxy measure for the overall strength of a challenge. The huge differences in population make comparison of campaign finances across states tricky. The usual pattern has been for spending to rise with state population (increasing costs) but at a decreasing rate (scale economies), so that neither total nor per-voter spending (nor their logs) permit straightforward comparisons, forcing scholars to adopt various ploys for dealing with the problem (Jacobson 1980, 1985; Abramowitz and Segal 1992; Gerber 1998). In recent elections, however, the relationship between campaign spending and population has weakened, as massive sums have been spent in even the least populous states where the outcome has been in doubt.⁹ This was again the case in 2006 (note the spending figures for the Montana Senate race and the Maryland gubernatorial contest). We found that the total spending figure or its log transformation, neither adjusted for population, produced the strongest statistical relationships. The log transformation provides the better fit in a majority of cases, so we use it here, although the same substantive conclusions would be supported if we used the untransformed financial data as our basic measure of a campaign's strength.

Early approval ratings strongly predict the financial resources mobilized against both Republican and Democratic senators (Table 5); the effect is larger for Republicans than for Democrats (although the interaction term falls short of statistical significance). The higher a senator's approval rating, the weaker the challenger's campaign finances. Other variables we examined—ideological extremism (estimated from DW Nominat scores), the state's partisan makeup (proportion of identifiers with the incumbent's party)—had no significant effect once early approval was taken into account. The incumbent's vote share back in 2000 was significantly (and negatively) related to the finances of challengers to Republicans but

⁹ For example, more than \$34 million was spent in the contest between Tom Daschle and John Thune for a South Dakota Senate seat in 2004—a total of \$67 for each of the state's 502,000 registered voters.

not to Democrats (although it has the correct sign); we omit this variable here to avoid losing a couple of senators for whom there was no 2000 vote. In states with Republican incumbents, the level of unhappiness with the Iraq War, the dominant national campaign issue, had a powerful effect on campaign finances; the more pervasive the anti-war sentiment in a state, the more money available to Democratic challengers.¹⁰ The average state-level approval rating of President Bush in 2005 also affected the funding of Democratic challengers (the lower Bush's ratings, the more money for Democrats), although its effects disappear when Iraq War support is included in the equation (the two variables are of course strongly related, $r = -.68$). According to the coefficient in the Republicans' equation, with Iraq War

Table 5. Incumbent Approval Ratings in 2005 and Senate Challengers' Finances

	<i>All Incumbents</i>		<i>Republican Incumbents</i>		<i>Democratic Incumbents</i>	
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>
2005 approval	-.26***	.05	-.18***	.03	-.13*	.06
Democratic incumbent	-5.78	4.32				
Democratic incumbent X 2005 approval	.09	.07				
Iraq War was a mistake			.21**	.05	.08	.07
Constant	30.37***	2.88	15.21**	3.70	18.19*	6.97
R ²	.58		.89		.39	
Number of cases	28		13		15	

Note: The dependent variable is the natural log of the total spending by and for the challenger; robust standard errors; excludes candidate's own contributions to the campaign.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

support set at its mean, campaign funds for Democrats are predicted to rise from \$97,000 against the highest rated Republican incumbent (78 percent approving) to \$14.9 million against the lowest rated incumbent (50 percent). The comparable range for Republican

¹⁰ Statewide estimates of support for the Iraq War are from the Cooperative Congressional Elections Study (Ansolabehere 2006); the survey was taken in late 2006, so for this analysis, we have to assume that assessments of the war, if they changed at all, did not change in systematically different patterns across the states.

challengers runs from \$344,000 (74 percent approving) to \$4.8 million (54 percent approving).¹¹

Although these equations suggest that Democratic money (for challengers) was distributed more strategically than Republican money in 2006, this is not necessarily true, for the simple reality of facing an uphill battle against any of these Democratic incumbents in 2006—none of whom had an approval rating below 54 percent in May-December 2005—may have been sufficient to deter strategically-minded Republicans regardless of variations across Democratic approval ratings. Moreover, in only two of these states—Nebraska and North Dakota, both with very popular incumbents—did a majority *not* believe the Iraq War was a mistake. As with Democratic challengers, the incumbent’s ideological extremism and the partisan makeup of the state did not affect the Republican challenger’s finances. Neither, in these states, did assessments of Bush or the Iraq War.

Senate incumbents’ finances were also shaped by strategic considerations. As always, their funding reflected the magnitude of the challenge they faced (Jacobson 2004) and thus, at least indirectly, the same national and local conditions that influenced challengers’ finances. There is a significant negative relationship between approval and incumbent spending ($r = -.75$ for Republicans, $r = -.36$ for Democrats), but it completely washes out once challenger spending is controlled. Republican incumbents’ funding was especially sensitive to their opponents’ funding; regressing the former on the latter produces an intercept of about \$2 million and a slope of 1.05, with an excellent fit to the data ($R^2 = .92$). Democratic incumbents also spent reactively, but the relationship is not as precisely estimated, mainly because of Hillary Clinton, who was spending the money for obvious purposes unconnected with the electoral threat she faced in New York (see Table 1); the intercept for Democratic incumbents is \$6.5 million with a slope of .71 and an R^2 of .28. Without Clinton, the estimate of the slope is the same but the intercept falls to \$4.9 million and the R^2 increases to .67.

¹¹ The analysis subtracts candidates’ own funds, as they are not subject to such stringent strategic calculations. Notice in Table 1, for example, that one very popular incumbent, Ben Nelson of Nebraska, nonetheless attracted a high-spending challenger, Pete Ricketts, who financed 90 percent of his \$13.4 million campaign himself. Wealthy self-financed candidates may ignore the kind of budget constraints that compel strategic decisions about allocating campaign resources; Ricketts, multimillionaire CEO of Ameritrade, founded by his billionaire father, clearly falls into this category.

Strategic Decisions: Governors' Challengers

The financial vigor of challenges to governors also reflected their 2005 approval ratings, but the relationships are considerably weaker than in Senate elections and vary less by party (Table 6); the coefficient on party indicates a Democratic advantage but is significant only at a generous $p < .10$ level. Again, we remind readers that the spending data for governors are still incomplete, so these relationships are not as accurately measured as we would like. As in Senate elections, Democrats challenging Republicans raised more funds the more unpopular the Iraq War in their states, indicating some spillover effect in these state contests from the national political climate.¹² No other variables we examined (e.g., the lagged governor's vote) affected the challenger's finances. The coefficients project that a Democratic challenger's funds would rise from \$472,000 to \$13.5 million across the range of approval values (60 percent to 40 percent); the projected funds for a Republican challenger's range from \$377,000 against the most popular Democratic incumbent (72 percent approving) to \$5.7 million against the least popular incumbent (41 percent approving).

Table 6. Incumbent Approval Ratings in 2005 and Governor Challengers' Finances

	<i>All Incumbents</i>		<i>Republican Incumbents</i>		<i>Democratic Incumbents</i>	
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>
2005 approval	-.08***	.02	-.08**	.02	-.08*	.03
Democratic incumbent	-.71 [†]	.41				
Iraq War was a mistake			.10*	.04		
Constant	19.34***	1.17	13.86***	2.55	18.96***	1.92
R ²	.42		.62		.44	
Number of cases	26		13		13	

Note: The dependent variable is the natural log of the total spending by and for the challenger; robust standard errors. Challenger-supplied funds are subtracted from the totals.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Incumbent governors' fundraising was, like that of senators, also shaped by strategic considerations, and again Republican incumbents' funding was more sensitive to their own

¹² The proportion in the state believing that the Iraq War had been a mistake had no effect on the finances of Republican challengers but was correlated *negatively* with the Democratic incumbent's approval rating, an artifact of highly popular Democratic governors in the very red states of Wyoming and Oklahoma.

approval ratings and the funding of their opponents. The correlation between 2005 approval and incumbent funding was $-.76$ for Republicans, $-.49$ for Democrats. Regressing Republican incumbents' funding on the opposition's funding produces an intercept of \$2.4 million, a slope of 1.31 and an R^2 of $.90$; the effects of 2005 approval remain significant when added to the equation and the R^2 rises to $.93$. Among incumbent Democrats, the intercept is \$2.0 million, the slope is $.46$ and R^2 is $.43$; if we drop Michigan, an extreme outlier (see Table 3), the respective figures are \$1.7 million, 1.39, and $.56$. The effects of approval are tiny and insignificant when spending by Republican challengers is taken into account.

The Effects of Strong Challenges on Changes in Approval Ratings

The next question is whether the well-funded challenges provoked by local and national conditions in 2006 simply took advantage of favorable conditions or had their own independent effect on the electorate. The first way we addressed this question was to determine if the financial strength of a challenge affected changes in the approval ratings of incumbents between May-December 2005 and September-October 2006. Table 7 displays the results of regressing change in approval on initial approval and spending by and for Senate incumbents and challengers. The first equation indicates that, other things equal, there was no partisan difference in change in approval ratings. Changes in approval ratings of both parties' incumbents were related to campaign spending in the expected direction, although in every case, the effects of incumbent spending cannot be reliably distinguished from zero. Among Democrats, the overall fit is poor and the results barely significant, but they indicate that, other things equal, the incumbent would gain about 1 percentage point in approval against the worst funded opponent while losing about 9 points against the best funded opponent. No Democrat is predicted to have a September-October approval rating that falls below 50 percent.

The fit is much better for Republicans, although collinearity between incumbent and challenger spending makes for a rather imprecise estimate of the effects of the latter; if incumbent spending is dropped, the coefficient on challenger spending shrinks slightly (to -1.38) but become significant at $p < .002$ and the R^2 is unaffected. The coefficient indicates that the change in approval would again range from about $+1$ points against the lowest

spending challenger to about -9 points against the highest spending challenger. However, three of the Republicans are predicted to end up with approval ratings below 50 percent, with another two below 51 percent; all five of them eventually wound up losing.

Table 7. The Impact of Campaign Money on Change in Senators' Approval Ratings

	<i>All Incumbents</i>		<i>Democrats</i>		<i>Republicans</i>	
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>
2005 approval	-.02	.22	-.16	.37	.11	.15
Incumbent is a Democrat	.66	1.78				
Log of challenger spending	-2.35**	.75	-2.68*	1.04	-1.44 [†]	.75
Log if incumbent spending	2.22	2.17	2.92	3.22	.12	2.16
Constant	-4.46	40.20	-7.65	64.66	7.06	33.11
R ²	.34		.21		.74	
Number of cases	28		15		13	

Note: The dependent variable is change in the average approval ratings of the incumbent from May-December 2005 to September-October 2006; robust standard errors.

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.01.

From Table 1 we see that two Democratic incumbents suffered unusually large drops in approval: Daniel Akaka of Hawaii and Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut. In both cases, the incumbent's main threat was an intra-party challenge. Akaka withstood his, 54 percent to 46 percent, and won reelection handily against a candidate who had been appointed by the state's Republican Party after the primary winner withdrew for health reasons. A review of Akaka's monthly ratings indicates that virtually all the decline in his approval occurred between April and May of 2006.¹³ The explanation is simple: the attention he received at that time from sponsorship of the eponymous Akaka Bill, a controversial and, in Hawaii, salient and divisive measure to establish special rights for Native Hawaiians.

Lieberman lost his primary for the same reason so many Republicans were in trouble: the Iraq War. He had defied the large majority of Connecticut Democrats who had come to oppose the war by continuing to defend both the venture and its architect, President Bush, and was defeated for renomination by Ned Lamont, 52 percent to 48 percent. He then ran in the general election as an independent with national Republican support and won a plurality

¹³ Between May 2005 and April 2006, his approval rating ranged from 63 to 72 percent, averaging 67.3 percent (standard deviation, 3.6); thereafter it ranged from 51 to 56, averaging 53.5 (standard deviation, 1.9).

of 49.7 percent in a three-way race against Lamont and an obscure Republican challenger. Not surprisingly in light of this history, Lieberman's approval ratings declined most dramatically among Democrats, falling 31 points, from 73 percent to 42 percent, between 2005 and late 2006. He also suffered a substantial loss of approval among independents (down 18 points, from 69 percent to 51 percent), while gaining points among Republicans (up 5, from 67 percent to 72 percent).

Lieberman's pattern was highly unusual. Elsewhere, the declines in senators' approval ratings during the election year tended to be much larger among opposition partisans and independents than among the senators' partisans. Table 8 displays the average changes in approval rating broken down by party identification and by whether or not the challenger mounted a well-financed campaign. Incumbents of both parties who faced only weak challenges lost little support overall or from any partisan subgroup (only Akaka, whose support dropped almost equally across partisan categories, deviates from this general pattern). For those who were strongly challenged, the decline in approval was concentrated among opposition partisans and, to a lesser extent, independents. On average, the ratings of strongly challenged Republican senators dropped by 14.7 points among Democrats, by 6.6 points among independents, but by only 3.4 points among Republicans. The ratings of strongly challenged Democrats (excluding the anomalous Lieberman) fell by 9.9 points among Republicans, by 6.8 points among independents, but they actually rose slightly (1.5 points) among Democratic partisans.

The evidence here, then, suggests that one important effect of a strong senate challenge was to reduce the incumbent's appeal to those constituents who did not share his or her party affiliation. This had the arithmetical effect of producing a more polarized electorate. For strongly challenged Republicans, the average difference in approval ratings offered by Republican and Democratic constituents grew from 30 points to 41 points; among strongly challenged Democrats, it grew from 25 points to 36 points (again, Lieberman aside). Weak challenges, in contrast, did not increase partisan divisions on the approval question.¹⁴

¹⁴ Polarization in approval ratings among senators not up for reelection in 2006 also did not change systematically over this period.

Table 8. Changes in Senators' Approval, by Partisan Subgroup

	<i>Incumbents' Partisans</i>			<i>Challengers' Partisans</i>			<i>Independents</i>			<i>All Respondents</i>		
	<i>May-Dec. 2005</i>	<i>Sept.-Oct. 2006</i>	<i>Change in Approval</i>	<i>May-Dec. 2005</i>	<i>Sept.-Oct. 2006</i>	<i>Change in Approval</i>	<i>May-Dec. 2005</i>	<i>Sept.-Oct. 2006</i>	<i>Change in Approval</i>	<i>May-Dec. 2005</i>	<i>Sept.-Oct. 2006</i>	<i>Change in Approval</i>
<i>Republicans</i>												
All (14)	76.2	74.3	-1.9	48.3	40.9	-7.4	56.7	53.3	-3.4	61.9	56.8	-5.1
Challenger spent <\$4 million (7)	80.9	80.5	-.4	54.5	54.5	.0	62.2	62.0	-.2	68.2	67.0	-1.1
Challenger spent >\$4 million (7)	71.6	68.2	-3.4	42.1	27.4	-14.7	51.2	44.6	-6.6	55.6	46.6	-9.0
<i>Democrats</i>												
All (15)	77.1	74.0	-3.1	50.2	44.4	-5.8	61.3	55.6	-5.7	64.6	60.6	-4.1
Challenger spent <\$4 million (8)	81.2	78.0	-3.2	50.2	45.9	-4.3	63.5	60.3	-3.2	66.7	64.1	-2.6
Without Akaka (7)	81.2	80.2	-1.0	49.4	47.2	-2.2	63.6	62.6	-1.0	66.6	65.9	-.7
Challenger spent >\$4 million (7)	72.4	69.3	-3.1	50.3	42.7	-7.5	58.9	50.3	-8.6	62.2	56.4	-5.8
Without Lieberman (6)	72.4	73.9	1.5	47.5	37.9	-9.6	57.1	50.3	-6.8	61.0	57.1	-3.9

Gubernatorial approval ratings also changed in response to campaign money spent over the course of the election year, but the patterns differ in important ways from those observed for senators (Table 9). First, other things equal, changes favored incumbent Democrats by 4.4 percentage points over incumbent Republicans; this was not true of senators, for whom the coefficient on party was tiny and insignificant. The regressions estimates reported in Table 9 also suggest that, unlike senators, sitting governors' own campaign spending significantly affected changes in their approval ratings, with the coefficient on spending if anything larger than that for challengers. The coefficients and constants that appear when parties are analyzed separately also indicate little difference between Republicans and Democrats in how money affected changes in approval. The coefficients on challenger spending indicate that, with the value for incumbent funds calculated from a regression of incumbent on challenger spending and lagged approval set at its mean, the approval ratings of the Democrat with the most poorly financed opponent would rise about 5.5 points, while the Democrat opposed by the most lavishly financed opponent would rise 2.2 points. The equivalent figures for Republicans were 1.3 points and 0.2 points, respectively. That is, with the expected counter-spending by incumbent governors taken into account, the approval ratings of all governors would be predicted to *rise* during the election year.

Table 9. The Impact of Campaign Money on Change in Governors' Approval Ratings

	<i>All Incumbents</i>		<i>Democratic incumbents</i>		<i>Republican incumbents</i>	
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>
2005 approval	-.11	.10	.07	.15	-.23	.15
Incumbent is a Democrat	4.41*	1.83				
Log of challenger spending	-3.38***	.85	-3.11*	1.06	-3.31*	1.06
Log of incumbent spending	4.41**	1.34	3.75*	1.32	4.83**	1.32
Constant	-11.44	14.97	-11.23	25.33	-11.85	25.33
R ²	.43		.40		.59	
Number of cases	26		13		13	

Note: The dependent variable is change in the average approval ratings of the incumbent from May-December 2005 to September-October 2006; robust standard errors.

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

This surprising result is confirmed by the data in Table 10. Regardless of whether they faced low or high spending challengers, incumbent governors of both parties on average gained approval points during the campaign. Gains were greatest among their own partisans, somewhat smaller among independents, and lowest among opposition party identifiers, with the only decline recorded among opposition partisans of Democrats with high-spending opponents. Consistent with the first equation in Table 9, Democrats on average enjoyed larger gains than Republicans. Why these results diverged so much from those for senators is a question we explore after examining how these variables affected the vote in 2006.

The Vote

The first equation in Table 11 treats the Senate incumbent's vote in 2006 as a function of campaign spending and party. Only challenger spending is included in equations for senators, because when logged incumbent spending is added, it displays the wrong sign and its collinearity with logged challenger spending ($r = .85$) makes estimates of the latter's effect wildly imprecise. When September-October approval is added, the coefficient on challenger spending drops sharply although it remains significant; spending evidently affected the vote directly as well as through its effect on approval ratings. As with the original effects of May-December 2005 approval (Table 2 and Figure 1), the relationship varies by party, although the partisan difference in slopes is not as dramatic. As Figure 3 shows, every Democrat whose late approval rating fell below 65 percent received a share of votes greater than his or her rating (e.g., their vote shares lie above the diagonal); most Republicans in that position did no better or worse at the polls than their (already comparatively low) approval ratings. Interestingly, among Republicans, the May-December 2005 ratings are more strongly related to the 2006 vote than are the September-October 2006 ratings ($r = .94$, compared to $r = .96$), although the two are of course very highly correlated with each other ($r = .97$). Among Democrats, later ratings are more strongly related to the vote ($r = .81$) than are early ratings ($r = .77$) and the relationship between the two is weaker ($r = .74$).

A separate analysis of Republican and Democratic Senate incumbents underlines the partisan differences in the impact of national as well as local forces in 2006. For Republican senators, early (or late) approval ratings and the president's standing in the state fully account

Table 10. Changes in Governors' Approval, by Partisan Subgroup

	<i>Governor's Partisans</i>			<i>Challenger's Partisans</i>			<i>Independents</i>			<i>All Respondents</i>		
	May-Dec 2005	Sep-Oct 2006	Change	May-Dec 2005	Sep-Oct 2006	Change	May-Dec 2005	Sep-Oct 2006	Change	May-Dec 2005	Sep-Oct 2006	Change
<i>Republicans</i>												
All (13)	71.8	76.8	5.0	42.4	43.4	1.0	51.3	55.5	4.2	54.7	57.4	2.7
Chal spent <\$4 million (8)	73.6	77.9	4.3	45.8	45.8	0.0	53.0	57.2	4.2	57.2	59.8	2.6
Chal spent >\$4 million (5)	68.9	75.2	6.3	36.9	39.6	2.7	48.7	52.9	4.3	50.7	53.5	2.8
<i>Democrats</i>												
All (13)	62.6	71.0	8.4	40.5	42.8	2.3	49.0	55.5	6.4	50.8	56.7	5.9
Chal spent <\$4 million (8)	66.2	75.5	9.3	49.3	54.6	5.3	54.8	63.3	8.5	56.4	64.1	7.7
Chal spent >\$4 million (5)	56.9	63.9	7.0	26.5	23.9	-2.6	39.9	43.0	3.1	41.9	44.9	3.0

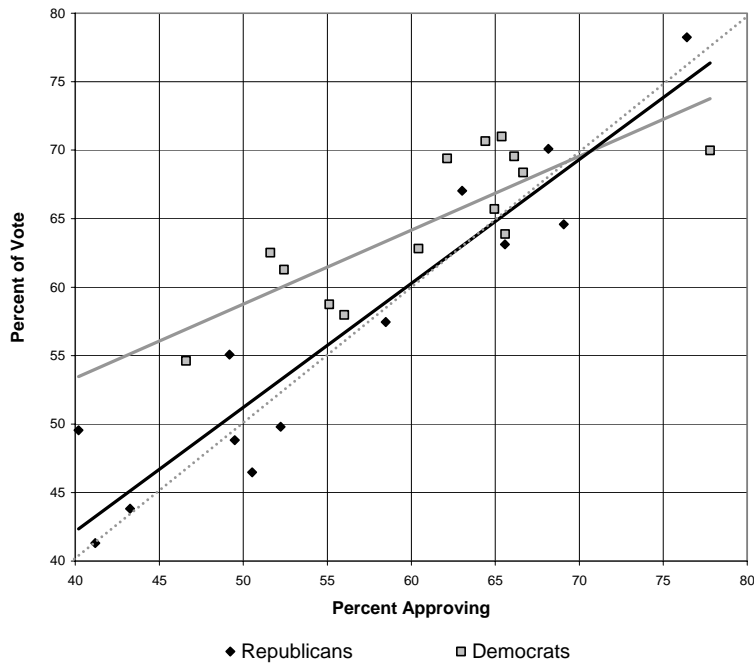
Table 11. The Vote for Incumbent Senators

	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>
Incumbent is a Democrat	6.81**	2.10	4.65**	1.39	21.22*	9.01
Log of challenger spending	-3.41***	.59	-1.33**	.43	-1.08*	.46
Sept.-Oct 2006 approval			.58***	.11	.71***	.13
Democrat X approval					-.28 [†]	.15
Constant	106.69***	9.24	54.87**	18.91	32.54*	12.08
R ²	.71		.88		.90	
Number of cases	27		27		27	

Note: the dependent variable is the incumbent’s share of the major party vote in 2006; robust standard errors.

[†] <.10; *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

Figure 3. Sept.-Oct. 2006 Approval and 2006 Vote for Senate Incumbents



for the results (Table 12). Challenger spending is so highly correlated with these other two variables that its estimated effect on the vote is insignificant once they are controlled, although entered by itself it explains 79 percent of the vote’s variance.

Table 12 Models of the Republican Senate Incumbents' Vote in 2006

	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E</i>
Log of challenger spending	-.14	1.36	-.71	.70
Bush's Approval Rating, September-October 2006	.23	.13	.20 [†]	.10
Incumbent's Approval Rating, September-October 2006	.83**	.25		
Incumbent's Approval Rating, May-December 2005			1.15***	.19
Constant	2.48	34.58	-11.95	23.08
R ²	.92		.96	
Number of cases	13		13	

Note: the dependent variable is the incumbent's share of the major party vote; robust standard errors.

[†] <.10; *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

In sum, then Republican Senate incumbents who showed early signs of personal vulnerability, and who also faced both national and local anti-administration sentiments, inspired a set of formidable challengers armed with the resources to exploit their vulnerabilities, ultimately costing six of them their seats. By acting on the expectations aroused by local and national conditions, strategic Democratic challengers and contributors thus helped ensure their fulfillment.

With Bush and the Iraq War so broadly unpopular in their states, most Democrats faced comparatively weak opponents regardless of local circumstances. Those Republican challengers who did take the field could not expect to get much traction by emphasizing their links to Bush. Thus local evaluations of the president had no significant effect on the Democratic incumbents' vote, although the pertinent coefficient shows the correct sign (Table 13). There was, however, a significant negative relationship between the Republican challenger's spending and the incumbent's vote independent of approval levels. Although local variables—the incumbent's approval level and the challenger's resources—explain much of the variance in the share of votes won by Senate Democrats, their effects were so overshadowed by the pro-Democratic national climate that none came close to losing (see Table 1). Potential Republican candidates and contributors who declined to invest heavily in

challenges to Senate Democrats in 2006 made the strategically correct decision, but their demurrals enhanced the advantage that popular unhappiness with the Bush administration had handed to Democratic senators seeking reelection.

Table 13 Models of the Democratic Senate Incumbents' Vote in 2006

	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E</i>
Log of challenger spending	-1.04**	.43	-.70	.69
Bush's Approval Rating, September-October 2006	-.05	.14	-.31	.19
Incumbent's Approval Rating, September-October 2006	.45**	.10		
Incumbent's Approval Rating, May-December 2005			.77***	.19
Constant	54.21***	10.57	36.79 [†]	17.21
R ²	.77		.76	
Number of cases	14		13	

Note: The dependent variable is the incumbent's share of the major party vote; robust standard errors.

[†] <.10; *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

The vote for governor also showed an across-the board Democratic advantage of about the same magnitude as in Senate elections (Table 14). Both the challenger and incumbent spending coefficients behave reasonably but become insignificant when we add September-October approval to the mix, suggesting that spending worked largely through its effect on approval. But notice that adding September-October approval improves the overall fit dramatically, indicating that components of approval unconnected with campaign spending dominated the process. Notice also that, unlike the case with senators, immediate pre-election approval has a considerably stronger relationship with the vote than does 2005 approval. There was no difference in the slopes on late pre-election approval for Republican and Democrats, but the gap remains (see Figure 4).

Comparing the patterns in Figure 4 with those in Figure 3, it is apparent that low approval ratings late in the campaign were considerably less damaging to governors than to senators. All six approved by half or fewer of their state's citizens still won, five with more than 55 percent of the vote (the only loser, Ehrlich, had a pre-election approval rating of 51

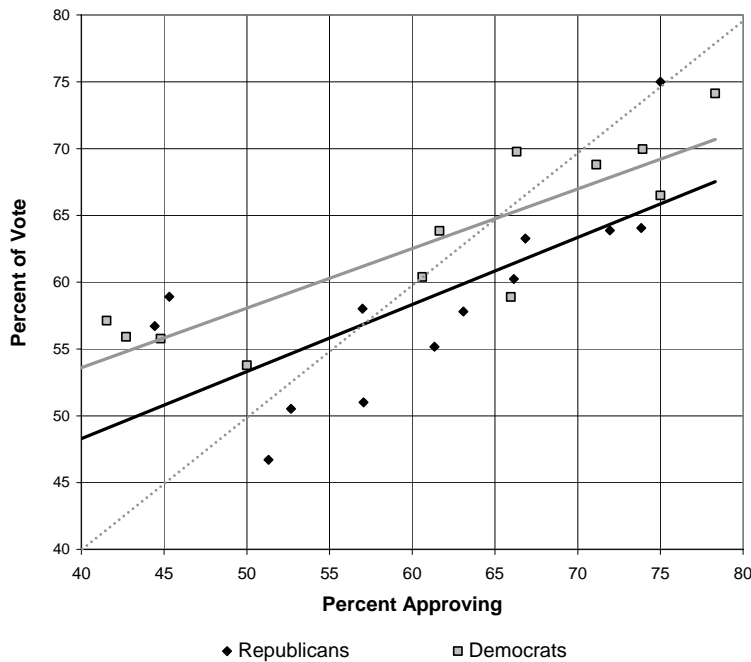
Table 14. The Vote for Incumbent Governors

	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S.E.</i>
Incumbent is a Democrat	4.36 [†]	2.40	4.63*	1.77	6.56**	2.07
Log of challenger funds	-4.09**	1.32	-1.17	1.17	-2.63*	1.16
Log of incumbent funds	2.32	1.62	1.44	1.21	3.36*	1.36
Sept.-Oct 2006 approval			.43***	.11		
May-Dec. 2005 approval					.39**	.11
Constant	82.34***	9.24	27.03	17.13	21.64	22.03
R ²	.31		.63		.54	
Number of cases	26		26		26	

Note: The dependent variable is the incumbent’s share of the major party vote; robust standard errors.

[†] <.10; *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

Figure 4. Sept.-Oct. 2006 Approval and 2006 Vote for Incumbent Governors



percent.) On average, the vote share of the nine governors whose September-October approval ratings fell below 55 percent ran 8.6 percentage points above their approval ratings, (the seven Democrats, 11.6 points higher, the four Republicans, 4.8 points higher). The vote share of the ten senators in the same predicament ran an average of only 3.6 points above their late-season approval rating, and only because the three Democrats ran 9.3 points higher; the seven Republicans won vote shares only 1.3 points higher than their final approval. Thus

although there were seven governors as well as ten senators whose performance was approved by fewer than 55 percent of their constituents, all but one governor won reelection while six of the senators were voted out of office.

Discussion

Analysis of the 2006 Senate and gubernatorial elections confirms several of the basic components of the theory that the strategic behavior of candidates and campaign contributors amplify the effects of national and local political conditions on election results, thereby enhancing electoral accountability. But it also points to quite striking differences in the electoral politics of the two offices.

Both national and local conditions affected the strength of the challenges to senators and governors, but the effects were generally more pronounced among Senate challengers. Democratic incumbents largely avoided serious Republican opposition, especially in the Senate races, where their relatively high approval ratings, combined with the strongly pro-Democratic political climate, yielded relatively weak opponents and comfortable reelection margins. But even relatively unpopular Democratic governors, a few of whom did attract well-financed opponents, won reelection handily, helped along by the powerful direct benefit of sharing the Democratic label in 2006.

The strongest evidence of consequential strategic behavior is provided by challengers to incumbent Republican senators; the lower their 2005 approval ratings, the stronger the opposition they provoked, and the stronger the opposition, the more their approval ratings declined and the worse they did on election day. The effects of national and local conditions were clearly reinforced in these contests by the strategic decisions of Democratic challengers and contributors. Republican governors also tended to attract stronger opposition the lower their approval ratings, but the relationship is weaker, and stronger opposition did not systematically reduce their standing with the public or cost them votes. Unlike incumbent senators, incumbent governors were apparently able to offset the effects of a high-spending opponent by spending money themselves. We offer this conclusion cautiously because the financial data for gubernatorial candidates are incomplete, but the evidence is consistent for both parties regardless of whether the dependent variable is change in approval ratings or the November vote. And our confidence in it is reinforced by the striking differences in the

changes in approval ratings from May-December 2005 to September-October 2006 experienced by senators and governors.

Senators generally suffered a decline in approval regardless of party or the strength of the opposition, although Republicans and strongly challenged senators endured larger declines; 82 percent of the Senate incumbents lost support over the election year. Governors generally enjoyed an increase in approval regardless of party or the strength of their opposition, although the increase did tend to be larger for Democrats than for Republicans; 65 percent saw their approval ratings improve between 2005 and election day. In short, running for reelection in 2006 generally made senators less popular, governors, more popular.

What could account for this difference? It cannot simply be that senators, as national politicians, were more strongly affected by national political forces than were state-level politicians, for the differences hold for Democrats and Republicans alike. We suspect the answer lies in the nature of the two offices and the different degree of political exposure their holders face. As legislators, senators enjoy ample opportunity for advertising, position-taking, and credit claiming (Mayhew 1974) as well as a variety of procedures for avoiding the traceable actions that might offend constituents (Arnold 1990). Each is only one of a hundred, so none is fully and directly responsible for any policy decision. Senators are normally free to be responsive to constituents' interests and opinions while avoiding individual responsibility for results that constituents would not appreciate (Jacobson 2004). The campaign context, however, exposes them to greater scrutiny and criticism, at least insofar as challengers are able to identify unpopular actions for which incumbents bear some plausible blame and have the financial resources to let voters know about them. The customary positive bias in the information projected about individual senators (not a little of which comes from their own offices) diminishes and may shift sharply in the negative direction if damaging issues arise and are exploited by effective challengers. The campaign season also makes their status as partisans more salient. They thus tend to lose popularity during the campaign season.

Governors, in contrast, are executives who cannot avoid responsibility for the unpopular actions of the state governments they head even when they have little real control over them. They cannot escape blame for the consequences of hard choices—raising taxes,

cutting services, or initiating other policies that create clear winners and losers—that inevitably displease some segments of their constituencies. Their ratings may also suffer from whatever broader discontents arise within a state (e.g., approval of governors is strongly and negatively related to state-level unemployment rates¹⁵). Governors are a principal focus of state political news coverage, which is more inclined to dwell on shortcomings than to celebrate successes. It is simply harder for governors than for senators to do their jobs without alienating some of the people who elected them. Negative information about their performance is already in wide circulation before the campaigns begin. Their campaigns may thus provide an opportunity to remind voters of the good news and to rebuild eroded support among components of their original electoral coalitions.

These are admittedly speculations, but it is indicative that the largest drop in senators' approval levels during the 2006 campaigns occurred among opposition party identifiers, especially where there was a high spending challenger, whereas the largest increase in approval of governors occurred among their own partisans (Table 15). That is, senators lost esteem among those who would be most sensitive to new or newly salient negative information about them—opposing partisans and, to a lesser degree, independents, whereas Governors gained esteem among those who would be most responsive to new or newly salient positive information about them—their own partisans and independents. This would help to explain why Senate incumbents do worse the more money spent by their opponents and are unable to offset the damage by their own expenditures, while incumbent governors seem to benefit at least as much as their challengers from campaign expenditures.

Table 15 Change in Approval of Senators and Governors, by Party

	<i>Incumbent's Partisans</i>	<i>Challenger's Partisans</i>	<i>Independents</i>
Senators	-2.5	-6.6	-4.6
Low spending challengers	-1.8	-2.2	-1.7
High spending challengers	-3.2	-11.1	-7.6
Governors	6.7	1.7	5.3
Low spending challengers	6.8	2.7	6.4
High spending challengers	6.7	0.1	3.7

¹⁵ Examining SurveyUSA's data on governor's approval from May 2005 through January 2006, one of us (Jacobson 2006) estimated that approval in the state with the lowest unemployment (2.8 percent) would be 26 points higher than in the state with the highest unemployment (7.9 percent).

Obviously, a good deal of additional research is needed to determine if these results are more than an idiosyncratic feature of 2006 and reflect true systematic differences in the electoral circumstances faced by executives and legislators. But if our speculation is on target, then the strategic information contained in approval ratings of incumbents in the year preceding an election has to be read differently for senators and governors. A senator who is viewed positively but only by a modest margin—for example, with approval ratings between 50 and 60 percent—may be objectively more vulnerable than a governor with much lower approval ratings; and a governor with ratings in the 40s is not necessarily a sitting duck for that reason alone.

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