Does Length of Incumbency Matter When Incumbents Face Scandal?

Introduction

In Hirano and Snyder's *What Happens to Incumbents in Scandals?*, they conclude that incumbents involved in serious scandals are more likely to be challenged and also more likely to lose when challenged in primaries than incumbents not involved in serious scandals. They also found that incumbents are especially likely to be challenged and lose in primaries in safe districts, or districts where the incumbent would probably win the general election. This analysis does not take into consideration the number of terms an incumbent has before the scandal. In our analysis, we put forth that the length of incumbency does impact the likelihood of a challenger and a loss to a challenger in the primary when incumbents face scandal. This is because more senior members of Congress may be less fallible to scandal, as they have risen to important positions in the party and a replacement may undermine the party as a whole even if the next Congressperson is from the incumbent's party.

Scandal and Length of Term

We analyze the impact of the number of terms served before scandal on primary and general elections in 1978-2008. Like Hirano and Snyder, we looked at the same five dependent variables.

The first, denoted *Primary Vote Share*, is the incumbent's primary election vote share, where uncontested incumbents are assigned 100% of the vote. The second, *No. Primary Opponents,* is the number of primary election challengers the incumbent faced. The third, *Primary Uncontested*, is a dummy variable indicating that the incumbent was uncontested in the primary. The fourth, *Quality Challenger*, is a dummy variable indicating whether the incumbent

was challenged by a ‘‘high quality’’ opponent in the primary. The fifth, *Won Primary*, is a dummy variable indicating that the incumbent won his or her primary.

The primary independent variable we look at is *Scandal*, a dummy variable equal to 1 when the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct or the Department of Justice investigated the incumbent, or when Congressional Quarterly Weekly Reports specifically discussed the scandal in at least one article. As noted by Hirano and Snyder, only about 3% of incumbents face scandal, and even fewer decide to actually run for reelection. Hirano and Snyder only analyzed incumbents that did run for reelection rather than just retire after the scandal, which they admit may have impacted their results.

We introduce a new independent variable called *Terms to Date*. This variable provides us with the number of consecutive terms an incumbent has served up to that point, regardless of redistricting[1]. We run the regression with this independent variable and divide the data into 13 categories based on the *Terms to Date* values. These categories are 1-12 and 13+ terms served. Using the linear model with year polynomials from the original paper, we add the independent variable *Terms to Date* to the regression and the interaction variable *Terms to Date*Scandal*. We then look at the coefficients on *Scandal*, *Terms to Date*, and *Scandal*Terms to Date* and compare them to the regression in the original paper to identify how *Terms to Date* impacts our various dependent variables. We only focus on the coefficients on these three terms in our regression results.

Results

[1] If a candidate served two nonconsecutive stints, we define his or her *Terms to Date* value as the length of the latest stint.

The model we used was a typical linear model with the dependent and independent variables listed above. To test for robustness, we ran multiple alternate regressions that for the sake of brevity are not included here. The main regressions we ran not included in the paper here are regressions where there are no year polynomials but rather a constant *Year* term. The five tables in the appendix include the dependent variables, the independent variables of interest, and the coefficients on said independent variables.

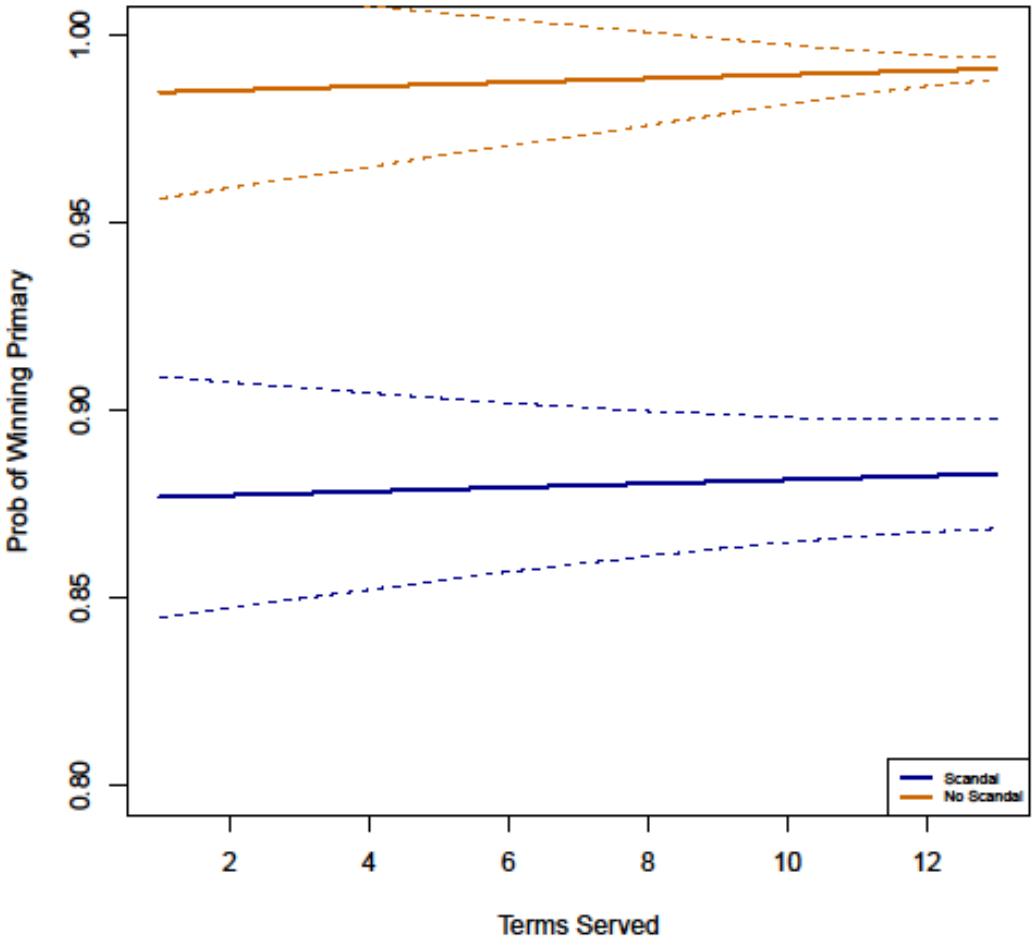
The coefficients on *Scandal* when using *Primary Vote Share*, *Uncontested Primary*, and *Quality Challenger* as the dependent variables remain the same as when *Terms to Date* is not used as an independent variable. Additionally, the coefficients on the interaction variable *Scandal*Terms to Date* are all insignificant at the .05 level. While *Terms to Date* alone seems to have some impact on these three dependent variables, the coefficient on *Terms to Date* is less than .005, making the effect *Terms to Date* has on these three dependent variables of little consequence in comparison to *Scandal*. This tells us that the primary vote share an incumbent receives, the probability of an uncontested primary, and the probability that a challenger in the primary was "high quality" are all minimally impacted by how many terms a Congressperson has served and that scandals have a significantly higher impact in determining these three dependent variables than the number of terms served by a Congressperson.

While *Terms to Date* has minimal impact on the three dependent variables listed above, it does make a moderate difference when regressing on *Number of Primary Opponents.* The coefficient on *Scandal* without *Terms to Date* as an independent variable in the regression is .77, while the coefficient on *Scandal* when *Terms to Date* is included in the regression is .83. This implies that the lack of a *Terms to Date* variable in the original regression caused a negative bias in the original *Scandal* coefficient and that the number of primary opponents a Congressperson

will face when a scandal occurs is slightly higher than previously thought. Also of note, the coefficient on *Terms to Date* is .01 and on *Terms to Date*Scandal* is -.01. An equivalent way to describe this portion of the regression is *Terms to Date*(.01-.01*Scandal)*. This says a lot about how the number of terms and scandals impact the number of primary opponents. When not in a scandal, a Congressperson is likely to have a higher number of opponents as their terms increase. At first this seems counterintuitive, but this may describe the desire for new blood in office by the party and to replace ancient lifelong Congresspersons. Also, while the number of terms served may increase the number of primary opponents faced, it does so modestly, and much less so than when a Congressperson faces scandal. Indeed, when a Congressperson is plagued by scandal, the terms to date he or she has served is insignificant, as shown above. The *Terms to Date* coefficient is wiped away by the coefficient on *Terms to Date*Scandal* when *Scandal* equals one. Therefore, scandals increase the number of primary opponents expected much more than the number of terms a Congressperson has served.

The second dependent variable that *Terms to Date* has an impact on is ultimately the most important one, *Won Primary*, or the probability a Congressperson wins the primary. When including the *Terms to Date* and *Terms to Date*Scandal* in the regression, the coefficient on *Scandal* decreases from -.10 to -.15. This implies that the lack of a *Terms to Date* variable in the original regression caused a positive bias in the original *Scandal* coefficient and that the probability a Congressperson will win a primary when facing a scandal is lower than previously thought. Also of note, and maybe the most significant finding in the paper, is that the coefficient on *Scandal*Terms to Date* is .014. This implies that the probability a Congressperson facing a scandal wins a primary increases as the number of terms they have served to date increases. This says that Congresspersons who have served longer durations are more likely to win primaries

than Congresspersons with shorter durations if both face scandal. However, there isn't a significant difference in voter percentage, number or quality of challengers when interacting terms and scandals. Thus this begs the question of where this increase in probability of winning the primary comes from. Seen below is a graph describing the probability of winning a primary when plagued with scandal over number of terms served, while holding other variables at their mean.



As shown, as the number of terms increases the probability of winning the primary increases for incumbents with scandals. Also of note is the confidence intervals decreases as the terms increases, making it much more likely the incumbent facing scandal wins the primary when he or she has multiple terms served as opposed to incumbents with fewer terms served

Conclusions

Overall, incumbents with scandals are impacted by the length of their incumbency in the primary. While the primary vote share the incumbent holds in the primary, the probability the incumbent faces a challenger, and the probability the incumbent faces a "high quality" challenger are not impacted by the length of the incumbency, the expected number of primary opponents and probability of winning the primary are greatly impacted. The expected number of primary opponents increases for incumbents without scandals as length of incumbency increases, but the expected number of primary opponents for incumbents with scandals is unchanged by the length of incumbency. However, the probability of winning the primary increases as length of incumbency increases for all candidates regardless of scandal. Therefore, length of incumbency matters when determining the probability of a primary win for incumbents with scandals. However, this isn't explained by them receiving a higher vote share, or facing less challengers. Thus a possible explanation is that when an incumbent is new and undergoes a scandal, the establishment backs someone else, so the opposition coalesces around some challenger. When facing a much longer tenured incumbent, the establishment stays neutral, and the opposition never really coalesces. This is also backed up by the fact that the confidence interval decreases in size, indicating that the longer tenured the incumbent, the more or a known quantity they are.

Appendix

A. New Regression Data

Table 1: Primary Vote Share

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)	0.79	0.02	42.35	0.00
data$scand	-0.17	0.02	-10.07	0.00
data$scand:data$terms	0.00	0.00	1.04	0.30
data$terms	-0.00	0.00	-3.66	0.00

Table 2: Number of Primary Opponents

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)	0.41	0.11	3.73	0.00
data$scand	0.83	0.10	8.28	0.00
data$scand:data$terms	-0.01	0.01	-0.90	0.37
data$terms	0.01	0.00	2.40	0.02

Table 3: Uncontested Primary

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)	0.74	0.07	11.00	0.00
data$scand	-0.26	0.06	-4.33	0.00
data$scand:data$terms	0.01	0.01	0.74	0.46
data$terms	-0.00	0.00	-2.70	0.01

Table 4: Quality Challenger

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)	0.19	0.03	6.00	0.00
data$scand	0.21	0.03	7.10	0.00
data$scand:data$terms	0.00	0.00	0.11	0.91
data$terms	0.00	0.00	1.54	0.12

Table 5: Won Primary

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)	0.91	0.02	59.94	0.00
data$scand	-0.15	0.01	-11.03	0.00
data$scand:data$terms	0.01	0.00	3.71	0.00
data$terms	-0.00	0.00	-0.28	0.78

*All other regression data from the original document may be found in the original document cited below.

Works Cited

Hirano, Shigeo and James M. Snyder Jr. "What Happens to Incumbents in Scandals?" *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 7 (2012): 447-456. Web.

nowpublishers.com/article/Download/QJPS-12039