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Competition and Congressional Representation: 
Are the benefits of competitive elections overstated?

Abstract
Conventional wisdom holds that competitive elections are essential to ensure that politicians behave in a manner consistent with citizens’ preferences. Two competing theories describe this relationship. Despite over half a century of research however, the impact of competition on representation remains unclear. This paper develops a new perspective called the similarity thesis which holds that legislators’ preferences are similar to those of the voters who elect them; thus competition does not influence responsiveness. The theory is tested on candidate behavior in campaigns, and legislator behavior in the U.S. Senate. The results support the similarity hypothesis in the campaign context, and the predictions of the homogeneity thesis in the context of legislative behavior. Consequently, the benefits of competition do indeed seem to be overstated.
Introduction

“As it is essential that the government in general should have a common interest with the people, so it is particularly essential that the branch of it under consideration should have an immediate dependence on, and intimate sympathy with, the people.”

James Madison, Federalist 52

A central theme of democratic theory is that government should remain close to the citizenry. While Madison was concerned primarily with impact of election frequency on government responsiveness, the principles underlying his argument speak to the importance of competition in elections. For what good are frequent elections if candidates are, in practice, unopposed? In such cases, the dependence of the elected on the citizenry is broken.

Among political scientists, a conventional wisdom has developed around this concept. Competition among candidates and parties acts to provide the citizenry with the highest quality candidates—those who are most responsive to, and reflective of, their preferences. Competition in elections is also thought to be essential to ensuring the responsiveness of those elected. Politicians that misstep face the constant threat that voters will notice, or be notified, and toss them out of office. Absent this constraint, safe politicians may brazenly shirk the weal without penalty. In this way, elections act to condition both those who are running for office and those who are elected.

Or do they? Six decades of research on the subject is inconclusive. Support for the idea that electoral competition leads to increased responsiveness has been questioned. A rival explanation that safe legislators, elected from homogeneous constituencies, are
more responsive also finds inconsistent support (e.g., Miller 1964, Jones 1973). These conflicting results are especially disconcerting given current political trends.

The last two decades have witnessed a growing ideological divide between the two parties (e.g., Jacobson 2003). This polarization appears to have manifest itself in an attempt by both parties to engage in strictly partisan gerrymanders—the drawing of district boundaries to maximize the number of seats held by majority partisans. Perhaps nowhere is this more visible than in Texas where Democratic members of the state legislature fled first to Oklahoma and more recently to New Mexico in order to prevent Republicans from implementing Tom Delay’s redistricting plan—the second reapportionment in just three years. Polarization may also be reflected in the decreased number of competitive elections. In 2002, there were about half as many competitive Congressional races as there were a decade earlier as only 48 of 435 House races were classified as competitive by Congressional Quarterly (Jacobson 2003).

If the conventional wisdom is correct, then decreased electoral competitiveness has potentially severe implications for democratic governance. However, if the implications stemming from Madison’s argument are incorrect, and competitiveness is irrelevant to democratic responsiveness, then the results of the instrumental political behavior described above, may have little effect on the citizenry. Consequently, the examination of the relationship between competitiveness and representation is an essential subject for students of representation.

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1 While the Texas case was most visible, it is not especially extreme. Colorado Republicans were successful in their partisan re-gerrymander prior to the Texas effort.
This paper examines a question central to democratic governance: Does competition influence representation, and if so, how? In it, I examine explanations for the relationship between competition and representation and develop a new alternative. Borrowing from Kingdon (1966, 1989) and Mayhew (1974) I develop a new thesis based on the observation that because citizens tend to elect legislators who are like themselves, competition has no effect on the degree to which legislators are responsive.

The paper proceeds in the following manner. I begin by reviewing research on the two traditional theories of competitiveness and representation and develop an alternative perspective called the similarity thesis. To evaluate these theories, I examine the influence of competitiveness on two important aspects of representation—centrism and responsiveness. The results depict no evidence that competitiveness influences representation in congressional elections. However, consistent with its predictions, but not the logic underlying it, the evidence ambivalently supports the homogeneity thesis as safer legislators are more responsive in their roll call voting behavior. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of these results for questions of reapportionment and studies of representation more broadly. A lack of electoral competition may break the dependence legislators have on the citizenry, but it does nothing to diminish the “intimate sympathy” that the elected seem to feel for the citizenry.

Two Theories, Inconclusive Findings

Representation is operationalized using the concept of responsiveness, which assesses the degree to which a legislator’s behavior corresponds to the preferences of their constituents. As constituents demand more of some good, a responsive legislator’s
behavior reflects this increased demand. Two theories explain the relationship between competition and representation. The marginality thesis, reflecting the conventional wisdom holds that increased electoral competition enhances responsiveness. In contrast, the homogeneity thesis holds that safe legislators, who face little competition should be most responsive. Studies examining these theses reach conflicting and ultimately inconclusive results.²

The marginality thesis holds that competitive elections enhance legislator responsiveness (e.g. Bernstein 1989, Krasno 1994). This thesis emanates directly from democratic theory, since competitive elections are thought to provide politicians with the “immediate dependence and intimate sympathy” with constituents to which Madison refers. Indeed, this view has become the received wisdom about the importance of competition on representation. The following statement is typical: “If they fear us, they’ll respect us, otherwise they can ignore us, and then we have no influence at all!” (Gelman 2002, 22). Marginal legislators are more vulnerable to opponents and hence more responsive to their constituents.

The logic is straightforward. Absent the threat of electoral defeat there are few constraints on legislators as they appear to have no other reason to behave in a manner consistent with citizens’ preferences. Implicit in this thesis is the idea that legislators, holding special status and privilege, might shirk the interests of the people. This thesis leads to the marginality hypothesis, illustrated in Figure 1, which holds that competitive elections are necessary to ensure that legislators reflect the peoples’ will.

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² For an extensive review see Fiorina (1973).
Owing to its clear and direct relationship with democratic theory, the marginality thesis has been widely studied. Overall, the results are mixed. MacRae (1952) first found support for the marginality hypothesis in his study of the Massachusetts House of Representatives. Other scholars using improved measures, controls and techniques also find evidence for the “marginality hypothesis” (e.g., Deckard Sinclair 1976, Sullivan and Uslaner 1978). Summarizing her findings Deckard Sinclair holds that the results clearly refute Huntington’s “hoary hypothesis” (1976, 480).

While the pedigree of the marginality thesis is distinguished, it has been widely criticized. MacRae’s (1952) early results were questioned by Froman (1963) and Shannon (1968). Fiorina (1973) reviews the mixed evidence and finds that the evidence fails to support this hypothesis. Moreover, he finds that despite the development of new measures and methods often resulting in support for the marginality hypothesis, on the whole, evidence is inconclusive.

Some critics espouse an alternative called the homogeneity thesis. For instance, Bryan Jones (1973) argues that legislators from safe districts ought to be most responsive to their constituents since opinion in homogeneous districts is easier to assess and less likely to be contradictory. Warren Miller (1964, 304) in the most direct test of this hypothesis finds “It is the marginal district congressmen who virtually ignore what they think to be district preferences in favor of their personal attitudes on policy questions—and this by a spectacular margin.” In contrast to the marginality thesis, the homogeneity thesis holds that decreased competition (i.e. increased safety) is associated with increased
responsiveness. A causal model illustrating the relationship specified by the homogeneity thesis is seen in Figure 2.

**Figure 2 Here**

While contrary to conceptions of democratic theory, the homogeneity thesis holds that aberrant behavior in safe districts is most likely to enrage citizens since such districts tend to be most homogenous. Incongruent behavior in safe legislative districts is most likely to both be noticed, and to anger the vast majority of voters. According to this thesis the homogeneity of citizens’ preferences serves to make legislators especially responsive.

Some findings support the homogeneity hypothesis. Jones’ (1973) study of the Texas legislature and Powell’s (1982) examination of contributors’ estimates of legislators preferences each support Miller’s (1964), findings that safe legislators are more responsive. More recently, Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001) find that while responsiveness varies over time, competitiveness is generally associated with divergence, consistent with the homogeneity hypothesis. Further, Groseclose (2001) advances a formal model of candidate positioning with a valence advantage which seems to predict these results.3

Clearly, scholars reach conflicting conclusions about the relationship between competition and representation. Indeed, while both theories find some support, a number of other studies report mixed or inconsistent results. Erikson (1971) finds that the results vary by party. Kuklinski’s (1978) study of the California Assembly finds that the

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3 Groseclose defines valence as a “non-policy factor, such as incumbency, greater campaign funds, better name recognition, superior charisma, superior intelligence, and so on.” (2001, 862).
marginality hypothesis is supported in only one of three issue areas. Hill and Hurley (1979) using Miller’s data with a different constituency variable also find limited support for the marginality hypothesis. Still others find no support for either theory. On the whole, neither theory is consistently supported by the evidence.

While results conflict, scholars are united in their call for improved measures and methods for investigating the relationship between competition and representation (see especially Fiorina 1973, Jones 1973, and Sullivan and Uslaner 1978). Misspecification of the independent variables is an especially serious problem since it has the effect of biasing coefficients in unknown directions (Greene 2000). In particular, the absence of good measures of district opinion and competitiveness are the largest impediments to assessing this hypothesis (Kuklinski 1978).4 For instance, only two studies apply opinion data to the study of the marginality hypothesis in the U.S. House (e.g., Miller 1964, Hill and Hurley 1979).5 Moreover, all studies focus on either state legislatures or the U.S. House, bodies characterized by relatively few competitive elections.

4 Problems measuring competitiveness are exemplified in Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart’s (2001) innovative work. These authors measure district competitiveness as a function of the difference between the two parties’ district level presidential vote. However, this measure overlooks the possibility that local level candidates might better reflect underlying district preferences than do candidates for national office who appeal to a much larger constituency. One clear example is seen in the case of North Dakota in 1984 where Walter Mondale was trounced by Ronald Reagan 65%-35%. Such a district would have to be considered an extremely safe GOP House seat. Except it’s not. Democrat Byron Dorgan, won the North Dakota at large House seat defeating his opponent by the same 65%-35% margin. Moreover, Democrats held every statewide office that year.

5 These estimates used by Miller, on average are based on district samples of between about 14 respondents. The estimates used by Hill and Hurley, which incorporates only majority partisans’ views, are
**Similarity: A Third Thesis**

“I didn’t have to check with my district to gauge their opinion, I was my district.”

—Representative Mike Abrams

Implicit in the logic underlying the marginality hypothesis is the idea that legislators’ preferences systematically differ from those of their constituents. From this perspective elections are necessary to force consonant behavior. However, if legislators like former Representative Abrams have preferences similar to those of their constituents, then their behavior should conform to their constituents’ preferences regardless of the level of competition in a state or district. John Kingdon (1989) notes that: “Because constituents usually select representatives who are roughly like them in policy terms…. its rare to find….a Burkean conflict between representatives’ views and constituents preferences.” (1989, xii). This logic, illustrated in Figure 3, provides the basis for the similarity thesis. Competition is irrelevant to responsiveness because constituents and legislators have similar preferences.

6 Personal interview, 9/2/03. Former State Representative Abrams in response to my question asking how he assessed the preferences of his liberal Miami Beach district. Abrams went on to point out that because of his background, his concerns and opinions coincide almost identically with those of his constituents.
There is extensive evidence, both direct and anecdotal, to suggest that voters elect candidates whose preferences are similar to those of the people they represent. First, a review of research on competition and representation shows that people elect candidates who are similar to themselves. Second, legislators and constituents have remarkably consistent attitudes. Research on political socialization explains why legislators and constituents have similar political preferences.

Taken as a whole, the findings of the competitiveness literature leads to conclusions that are consistent with the similarity thesis. Summarizing dozens of studies, Fiorina concludes that Warren Miller’s “….study is the only one which bears directly on the marginality hypothesis.” (1973, 495). Instead, many studies show simply that “Republicans from Republican districts vote Republican, while those from not-so-Republican districts do so less frequently. And similarly for Democrats.” (Fiorina 1973, 485). While this research was published about three decades ago, little evidence has emerged to refute these conclusions. Moreover, to the extent that similarity could be seen as a valence advantage, this thesis is also consistent with Groseclose’s(2001) model of issue positioning.

Results consistent with the similarity thesis are also seen in studies that examine the consistency between legislator and constituent opinion. Examining the correspondence between legislator and constituent opinion, John Kingdon (1989, 64) finds that they disagree on less than 25% of issues and even these tend to be issues of very low salience. He concludes that the largest influence on legislator voting is their recruitment: “It often happens that a congressman never feels pressured by his
constituency and in fact, never even takes them into account, simply because he is “their kind of people, anyway” (1989, 46). Uslaner (1999) argues that most legislators don’t have a hard time representing their district because they share the same ideas and values as their constituents. Attempting to statistically disentangle the impact of legislator and constituent preferences on legislator behavior, Uslaner concludes that there is little legislator ideology left after doing so, because their preferences are so similar (1999, 83). Preference similarity is the foundation of the similarity thesis.

Socialization, group membership and political culture help explain why we might expect legislators and constituents to share preferences. Individuals raised in the same area will experience similar patterns of socialization, similar affect toward and identification with groups as a product of shared socio-economic circumstances (Allport 1935, Sherif and Cantril 1947, Barnes 1966). Uslaner (1999) offers political culture as the mechanism. “It stems from a states history and the values of the different segments of the population.” (1999, 6). Elazar further explains that “Sectional concentrations of distinctive cultural groups have helped create the social interests that tie contiguous states to each other even in the face of marked differences in the standard measures of similarity.” (1966, 94). Legislators and constituents share political views not because legislators seek to appeal to majority opinion but rather because legislators and constituents tend to share the same political experiences and socialization.

The similarity thesis generates two directly testable implications. First, it implies that when measured on the same scale, legislators’ positions should be similar to those of the people. Common socialization drives both legislator and constituent preferences. Consequently, it predicts that candidates should be close to constituents, but makes no
prediction about the influence of opinion on responsiveness, since legislators do not
‘respond’ to constituents. Second, controlling for other factors, it predicts that
competition should not affect representation. The relationship between competition and
responsiveness for each of the three hypotheses is pictured in Figure 4.

**Figure 4 Here**

**Data and Methods**

The three theses generate several testable predictions and implications which I
test in the following way. First, the logic underlying the mechanisms that drive the
homogeneity and similarity hypotheses is examined. Then, the predictions the theories
make pertaining to responsiveness are tested on both elections and on institutional
behavior. These tests allow for the evaluation of whether the outcomes predicted by the
theories occur.

Given its pedigree, it is somewhat surprising that the marginality hypothesis has
not been examined in the context of the U.S. Senate. Indeed, the Senate appears to be an
especially appropriate laboratory, because there is substantially greater variation in the
proportion of races that are competitive. For instance, Abramowitz and Segal (1992)
point out that House incumbents are safer and face less turnover, with about 90% of
incumbents being re-elected. Many House districts are designed to be uncompetitive
(Herrnson 2000). Senate races are more competitive in large part because incumbent
senators face more highly skilled challengers who wage intense campaigns (Krasno
1994). Given this evidence, competitive House districts might be seen as rare. A major
reason for this is that House districts are the product of gerrymanders often performed to
enhance partisan advantage (Jacobson 2000). In this light it seems odd that the
marginality hypothesis has been tested exclusively in places where competitive races are
unusual. Consequently, all of the tests performed herein use either states, or senate seats
as the units of analysis.

To examine the effects of competition, comparable data are needed that assess
legislator and constituent preferences as well as competitiveness. Excellent measures are
available in the *American National Election Study: Pooled Senate Election Study* (PSES)
which surveyed respondents from each state in 1988, 1990 and 1992. These data are
optimal since they gauge constituents’ opinion in each of the 50 states across three
election cycles, thereby overcoming several problems.7

*Diversity, Competition and Ideological Similarity: Examining the Assumptions*

The homogeneity thesis rests on the assertion that less competitive seats tend to
be homogeneous. We can test the prediction that safety is negatively associated with
political diversity by performing a simple regression of electoral competitiveness on
political diversity.

Competitiveness taps the degree to which a seat is safe. Measures of competition
should be independent of candidate and legislator behavior since the relationship may be
non-recursive. As Mayhew (1974, 37) points out “….if a legislator stopped answering
his mail, or began voting randomly on roll calls, or shifted his vote record eighty points

7 These include: measuring constituency preferences (Kuklinski 1978), examining behavior in only the
most populous states (Krasno 1984), and examining only a single Congress (Sinclair Deckard 1976).
on the ADA scale, he would bring on a primary or November election troubles in a hurry.” Clearly behavior can influence the level of competition.

To overcome the potential for endogeneity the measure of safety used herein is averaged across seats and over a long period of time. Safety is measured using a derived version of the *Congressional Quarterly* evaluation of the degree to which the seat is safe. *Congressional Quarterly* rates seats on a seven point scale that ranges from “safe Democrat” to “safe Republican”. To assess competitiveness I collapse the categories such that “leaning”, “favored” and “safe” races are coded without respect to party. This provides a four point scale that ranges from “toss up” to “safe”. In order to rate the general competitiveness of each seat (state), I calculate the average CQ rating for all senate races between 1984 and 2000 and then convert them to the four point scale above.

Political Diversity reflects the degree to which a states citizens exhibit variation in their political ideology. Diversity is calculated in two ways, reflecting distinct substantive phenomena described in the representation literature (e.g., Pitkin 1967). Political Diversity is estimated using the state level variance of ideological self-placement on the 7 point ideological scale. This reflects the dispersion of political preferences in each state (e.g., Gronke 2001). This variable should be negatively signed. Descriptive Diversity applies the widely used Sullivan Index to estimate the probability that two randomly drawn individuals in a district will share the same physical characteristics (e.g. Sullivan 1973, Morgan and Wilson 1990). Since higher values of the

8 Variation in these variances are directly comparable since the number of respondents in each state and year are roughly comparable.
Sullivan Index reflect greater homogeneity, via a greater probability of sharing descriptive characteristics, this variable should be positively signed.

Two additional controls are included to account for the potential influences on competitiveness. State population has been shown to be related to competitiveness (Krasno 1984). The variable *Population* as measured in millions captures this influence. In addition, net state partisanship may influence the degree to which a seat is safe. The variable *State Partisanship*, measured as the net GOP advantage in a state, captures this effect (Erickson, Wright and McIver 1993).

**Table 1 Here**

The results of these analyses are seen in Table 1. The coefficients are both insignificant and incorrectly signed. Moreover, the models explain almost none of the variance in state level diversity. These results are inconsistent with expectations generated by the homogeneity hypothesis. If the logic underlying homogeneity is correct, these coefficients should be significant, large and in the expected direction. This is not the case.9

The logic underlying the similarity thesis implies that legislators are similar to their constituents. Consequently, examination of their respective political preferences

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9 I re-estimated the results using three alternative measures of safety based on the average quality of opponents—using Jacobson’s (2001) definition of quality challenger as one who has won statewide office—in a state over the same time period. In no case are the results statistically different. I also ran this analysis using alternative competition measures from the 1988, 1990 and 1992 election cycle such that the competitiveness of the current race, and the three year average of state competitiveness were evaluated. In no case was a result statistically significant. In most cases the results were incorrectly signed.
should show little difference. We can examine the degree to which legislators and citizens preferences differ within constituencies using the PSES data.

The PSES allows for the examination of whether the state level mean difference between citizen and legislator ideology is statistically significantly different than zero. I test this in two ways. First, I calculate the difference between constituents and legislators ideological placement in each of the states. Both ideology measures are constructed using a 7 point scale, ranging from 1 to 7, such that higher values reflect increased conservatism. The average ideological difference between constituents and incumbents is -.002. This difference is not statistically different from zero (p<.47). On average, across all states, these differences approach zero.

However, this method poses a potential problem. It is possible that the mean difference is near zero, precisely because a series of large differences between legislators and constituents cancels out across states. Consequently, we are also interested in the absolute size of the difference between constituents and legislators calculated by taking the absolute value of all distances between incumbent senators and mean district ideological position for each state. The mean of these absolute differences is .48, which while significantly different from zero, is quite small in absolute terms given the size of

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10 While a citizen’s estimate of a legislator’s preference is not an objective indicator of legislator ideology, it is a better indicator for testing the theory. For if legislators distort or change their true preferences to better reflect or correspond to the citizenry, then their behavior is an attempt to reduce the degree to which they are perceived as differing with the voters, behavior consistent with similarity hypothesis. Moreover, this measure has been extensively validated (Burden, Calderia and Groseclose 2000, Also see Gershtenson 2001).
On average, voters see incumbents as less than ½ a category away from themselves on a seven point scale. Moreover in over 90% of the states, voters see their incumbent senator as less than a category away from them, since in about 95% of the states, senators are less than one category away on the seven point scale.

Overall these results support the logic underlying the similarity hypothesis. Citizens view legislators as ideologically similar to themselves. While the absolute distances are significantly different from zero, they are substantively small given the range of the scale.

*Competition and Representation: Testing the Predictions*

The predictions generated by the three theories are tested in two ways. First, I examine representation in the context of congressional elections (Fenno 1978). Then, I examine the degree to which competitiveness impacts responsiveness in senators’ roll call voting behavior. By examining representation in both campaigns and in Congress, these tests allow for a more complete evaluation of the impact of competition than do past studies.

*Competitiveness and Representation in Senate Elections*

Elections are integral to representative democracy and are substantively inseparable from the behavior legislators engage in following election (Fenno 1978). In addition to serving as a check on the behavior of elected officials (e.g., Arnold 1993)

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11 Because the sampling distribution of this statistic is unknown, the 95% confidence interval (.417 to .554) was estimated using the bootstrap (Efron and Tibshirani 1986).
elections provide the public with information about the candidates (Kahn and Kenney 1999). More specifically, examination of candidate positioning allows for the evaluation of both the degree to which politicians reflect the preferences of the citizenry as well as the effect of competition on candidates’ positions.

I assess the relationship between competitiveness on representation in senate elections by examining two aspects of representation. Centrism reflects “…how well the representative minimizes his distance to his constituents…” (Achen 1978, 488). Responsiveness, commonly described as congruence (e.g. Hall 1996), reflects the degree to which candidates positions are biased toward or away from constituents’ positions.

**Centrism**

The dependent variables used to assess centrism and responsiveness are calculated using PSES placements of both candidates and respondents on the seven point ideological scale. More specifically, centrism is measured by calculating the squared distance between the average of the candidate’s and the mean constituent’s policy preference in each state. Higher scores are associated with decreased centrism.

Several variables are thought to explain candidate positioning during campaigns. Competition, as reflected by the degree to which a seat is safe, is the centerpiece of the analysis. *Safety* is measured using the four point scale discussed above. Higher scores correspond to decreased levels of competitiveness. Research shows that numerous advantages accrue to entrenched incumbents and these benefits may provide additional leeway in their positioning (e.g., Sullivan and Uslaner 1978, Wright and Berkman 1986).
A dummy variable accounts for whether or not the candidate is the incumbent. *Incumbent* candidates are scored ‘1’ while non-incumbents are scored ‘0’.

Two additional statistical controls are needed to account for background factors as well. First, *State Partisanship* may condition centrism as it may be easier to offer centrist positions in states that are dominated by one political party. *State Partisanship* and *Population* are measured as above. These variables are operationalized in the following model which is estimated using OLS regression since *Centrism* is normally distributed (Achen 1978):

\[
Centrism = \alpha + \beta_1 \ast Safety + \beta_2 \ast Incumbent + \beta_3 \ast State\ Partisanship + \beta_4 \ast Population + \varepsilon
\]

The predictions each of these theses generates are summarized as follows. The marginality hypothesis predicts that *Safety* and *Centrism* will be negatively related while the homogeneity hypothesis predicts the opposite. The similarity hypothesis predicts no relationship between *Safety* and *Centrism*. However, the similarity hypothesis predicts that *Incumbent* should be negatively signed while the homogeneity and marginality hypothesis make no prediction as to the sign of this variable. Finally, none of the three hypotheses make predictions concerning *State Partisanship* or *Population*.

The results of the centrism model are obtained using OLS regression and are seen below in Table 2. Several results stand out, all of which support the similarity thesis. First, the incumbency coefficient is highly significant and signed negatively, suggesting that incumbents are closer to constituents than are challengers. Second, the *Safety* variable is insignificant suggesting that competition does not influence centrism.
Responsiveness reflects the degree to which candidates’ positions correspond to constituents’ preferences. Responsiveness is assessed by examining the size and significance of the slope coefficient from a regression of candidate ideology on mean constituency ideology (Achen 1978). Opinion is measured using the Erikson, Wright and McIver mean state ideology measure (1993, 16) which is calculated by subtracting the percent giving the conservative response from the percent giving the liberal response.\textsuperscript{12} This measure is rescaled such that higher scores correspond to increased conservatism. However, in order to assess the predictions of the marginality, homogeneity and similarity hypotheses, interaction terms must be created since responsiveness is not operationalized as the dependent variable, but rather is assessed through the impact of the constituency variable on the dependent variable (Kuklinski 1978). The impact of competition and incumbency on responsiveness is thus, a product of their interaction with the opinion variable.

The impact of competition on responsiveness is tested using an interaction created by multiplying Safety by Opinion. To examine the relationship between incumbency and responsiveness an interaction term is created by multiplying Incumbent by Opinion. As with the centrism tests, controls for state partisanship and population are also included.

The tests are performed using the following model:

\textsuperscript{12} The results reported below (in Tables 5 and 7) were re-estimated using the PSES state mean of respondents’ self-placement on the seven point ideological scale. The results are seen in Appendix A and are substantively similar to those reported here.
Candidate Ideology = $\alpha + \beta_1^* (Safety \times Opinion) + \beta_2^* (Incumbent \times Opinion) + \beta_3^* State \ Partisanship + \beta_4^* Population + \varepsilon$

The marginality hypothesis implies that safety should be negatively related to responsiveness, while the homogeneity hypothesis implies just the opposite. The similarity hypothesis predicts no relationship between safety and responsiveness. Neither the homogeneity nor the marginality hypotheses make any prediction as to the relationship between Incumbent x Opinion and therefore it should be insignificant. However, the similarity hypothesis holds that the Incumbent x Opinion variable should be significant and positive, suggesting that incumbents are more responsive.

In order to estimate the influences on responsiveness OLS regression is used since the dependent variable is continuous and normally distributed (Achen 1978). The results of this estimation are depicted in Table 3.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Table 3 Here--}

These results provide no support for the marginality or homogeneity hypotheses but do provide support for the similarity hypothesis. Consistent with the prediction of the similarity hypothesis, Incumbent x Opinion is significant and correctly signed. Moreover,

\textsuperscript{13} The sample sizes for the positioning analyses total 190 since approximately 33 incumbents face about 33 challengers in each of three years in the election cycle. (33+33x3=198). Missing cases are primarily due to the unavailability of opinion estimates for Alaska and Hawaii for the Erikson, Wright and McIver measure.
the interaction of Opinion x Safety, is insignificant. There is no evidence to suggest that competitiveness mediates the impact of constituent opinion.  

Together, these campaign positioning results are consistent only with expectations concerning the similarity thesis. We cannot reject zero as an estimate of the relationship between competitiveness and representation. In addition, Incumbent is significant in the centrist model while Incumbent x Opinion is significant in the responsiveness model. Each of these findings is consistent with expectations concerning the similarity thesis and inconsistent with the findings of the marginality and homogeneity theses.

**Competitiveness and Representation in Senate Roll Call Voting**

This section examines the relationship between competitiveness and representation in senators’ roll call voting behavior. In order to measure legislator behavior, I use D NOMINATE first dimension scores which summarize senator behavior on the traditional liberal-conservative ideological space (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). These scores are ideal for use as a general measure since they are based on almost all recorded votes. The scores vary by Congress but generally range from about -1, liberal to 1, conservative.

The predictions emanating from the three theses in the roll call voting context are similar to those of the campaign context. However, two additional variables are

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14 The positioning results are also consistent with Groseclose’s (2001) model of issue positioning with valence. However, since similarity as a candidate characteristic may also be a valence advantage Groseclose’s theory seems unable to distinguish between the homogeneity and similarity theses.

15 There is some controversy about whether a dummy variable reflecting a legislator’s party identification should be included in models explaining legislator behavior in Congress (e.g., Krehbiel 1993). Fiorina
Scholars find that senior members of Congress pursue different goals than do newly elected members (Fenno 1978). Seniority is measured as the number of years served in the senate (Sullivan and Uslaner 1987). Second, the number of years until the next election may condition responsiveness and is included as Years to Election. Finally, the Safety x Opinion interaction, State Party Identification and Population variables are measured as above. The model of senate voting behavior is summarized as follows:

$$\text{Roll Call Votes} = \alpha + \beta_1 \times \text{(Safety x Opinion)} + \beta_2 \times \text{Population} + \beta_3 \times \text{Seniority} + \beta_4 \times \text{State Partisanship} + \beta_5 \times \text{Years to Election} + \varepsilon$$

The results of this model are seen in Table 4 and vary little across years. Perhaps most striking is the uniformity of the results. For every year, the results are almost identical and are consistent with the predictions of the homogeneity hypothesis. In every case, we see that the key variable Safety x Opinion is positively signed and highly significant suggesting that increased electoral competition is negatively associated with responsiveness. Safe legislators are more responsive than are the unsafe.

Table 4 Here

(1974) demonstrates that it artificially suppresses constituency effects. The reduced role of party in the Senate vis a vis the House (see Smith 2000 for an extensive review) mitigates against its inclusion. However, results including party are substantively similar to those reported here.

16 Seniority is excluded from the centrism and responsiveness models since challengers and open seat races have no data on this variable. Obviously, since all legislators are incumbents, Incumbent is excluded from the roll call models.

17 As in the campaign positioning context, the results (depicted in Appendix B) were re-estimated using the PSES opinion measure in this interaction and are substantively similar to those seen in Table 7.
In sum, the results for senate behavior are quite different from those observed in the context of campaigns. The roll call voting context provides direct evidence supporting the homogeneity hypothesis—safer senators are more responsive.

Discussion

These results suggest that impact of competition on responsiveness varies across democratic venues. Competitiveness does nothing to influence positioning in campaigns; a result consistent with the predictions of the similarity thesis. In contrast, legislator roll call voting behavior is consistent with the predictions of the homogeneity thesis as safer legislators are more responsive than are those from competitive states.

While the data support the predictions of the homogeneity thesis in the roll call voting context, they also call its underlying logic into question. The necessary premise of the homogeneity thesis—that electoral safety is a function of state or district diversity—finds no statistical support. This suggests that the mechanism underlying homogeneity—that safe states and districts tend to be more homogeneous—may be incorrect. The results presented here support the predictions of, but not the mechanism underlying, the homogeneity thesis.18

These results further suggest that more nuanced explanations of the impact of competition across representational venues are needed. How can we explain the absence

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18 One possible explanation for the failure of marginality is that primary competition may condition behavior of safe legislators. However, incumbents seldom face a serious primary challenge. For instance, in 2002 only Bob Smith (R-NH) faced a serious primary threat, and that was largely because he left the party to run for President in 2000.
of competition as a constraint on candidate positioning simultaneous with its significant influence on legislator behavior in Congress?

Perhaps the obvious answer lies in Mayhew’s suggestion that the relationship between competition and representation is non-recursive. Mayhew (1974) and Kingdon (1966, 1989) both suggest that legislators become safe precisely because they engage in the behavior necessary to make themselves safe. From this perspective, legislators anticipate the possibility of future competition and behave in a manner consistent with constituents’ preferences, thereby decreasing the probability they will face competitive elections in the future. This anticipation thesis fits these roll call voting data well and provides a mechanism consistent with the results pertaining to competition and diversity. However, this thesis fails to explain the candidate positioning results. In fact, it would seem to strongly suggest that skillful legislators—from safe states—should be more responsive in their positioning; a condition that is not observed.

An alternative explanation that accounts for these differences and compliments the anticipation thesis might be seen in Tracy Sulkin’s (2003) theory of issue uptake, which holds that:

“…challengers have an incentive to identify salient issues that the incumbent has previously neglected and to prioritize these issues in their campaigns. Incumbents, in turn, are motivated to respond to these signals and act on their challengers’ issues in office in order to remedy their weaknesses and promote their own re-election prospects.” (2002, 172).

In this context, legislators act on information gained from the campaign by adopting these positions in their behavior in Congress. By accounting for both anticipation and different

19 Moreover, the manner in which the competitiveness variable (Safety) is constructed (a 16 year average) makes it much less likely to be susceptible to endogeneity stemming from political skill.
behavior across different democratic venues, Sulkin’s strategic motivation theory seems to explain the varied impact of competitiveness.

**Conclusion**

The widely recognized and cataloged benefits of competitive elections (e.g., Krasno 1984, Kahn and Kenny 1999) do not seem to extend to representation. This paper challenges the conventional wisdom concerning the importance of competition for representation and develops an alternative explanation, called the similarity hypothesis. The results suggest that the role of competition and its relationship to representation is substantially more complex than previously recognized. In particular, the results suggest that the impact of competition varies across the different aspects or venues of democracy. While the similarity thesis best explains campaign positioning, the predictions of the homogeneity thesis most clearly match what we observe in Congress. However, this paper also calls into question the assumptions underlying the homogeneity thesis, suggesting that some other mechanism may be driving this process.

Indeed, these results are consistent only with a theoretical framework not previously applied to this question—Sulkin’s (2002) strategic motivation theory. Consequently, the paper casts substantial doubt on the generalizability of all three theses and finds that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, increased electoral competition (when it matters at all) seems to decrease rather than increase responsiveness. With respect to representation, it appears that the benefits of competitive elections are not only overstated, they are more complex than previously recognized. Moreover, future studies
ought to go beyond the examination of single aspects of the representation process (i.e.,
campaigns or roll call votes) and consider the system holistically.

These results also imply that concerns about the necessity of drawing competitive
districts in order to maximize legislative responsiveness are overblown. This research
suggests that a lack of electoral competition, rather than distorting responsiveness, in fact
seems to increase it. However, these results should not be interpreted to mean that
misrepresentation does not occur. In a republic that includes states like Florida where the
electorate is evenly split along partisan lines but where legislative delegations have
supermajorities held by a single party, there are clearly asymmetries in the system.

These results are limited in that they do not speak to questions of representational
efficiency, “fairness”, or the possibility that dyadic responsiveness might be maximized
while collective representation suffers. Taken in the context of a vast literature
demonstrating that representation occurs, these results suggest that once districts are
drawn, legislators represent them. However, they do not speak to the possibility that
some equally well represented constituents may be significantly disadvantaged in their
ability to influence policy.

This work also raises questions as to the degree to which elections matter at all. If
competition is unnecessary for responsiveness, what is it about elections that constrain
legislators? Madison’s quote about the importance of maintaining the “immediate
dependence on, and intimate sympathy with, the people….” was directed toward the
necessity of holding frequent elections. This question is largely unstudied, however, and
the benefits ascribed to elections are often thought to be reserved only for competitive
ones. Given the results of this study, the implication that frequent elections serve to
constrain legislators demands scrutiny. For instance, while the results presented here suggest that redistricting does not endanger responsiveness, it is possible that term limits do.
References


Figure 1. The Relationship between Competition and Responsiveness under Marginality.

\[ + \]

\[ \text{Competition} \rightarrow \text{Responsiveness} \]

Figure 2. The Relationship between Competition and Responsiveness under Homogeneity.

\[ + \]

\[ \text{Diversity} \rightarrow \text{Responsiveness} \]

\[ \text{Competition} \rightarrow \text{Responsiveness} \]

Figure 3. The Relationship between Competition and Responsiveness under Similarity.

\[ + \]

\[ \text{Culture} \rightarrow \text{Responsiveness} \]

\[ \text{Constituent Preferences} \rightarrow \text{Responsiveness} \]

\[ \text{Legislator Preferences} \rightarrow \text{Responsiveness} \]

Figure 4. Predictions of the Relationship between Competition and Representation According to Each Thesis.

\[ + \]

\[ \text{Marginality} \]

\[ \text{Competition} \rightarrow \text{Responsiveness} \]

\[ \text{Homogeneity} \]

\[ \text{Competition} \rightarrow \text{Responsiveness} \]

\[ \text{Similarity} \]

\[ \text{Competition} \rightarrow \text{Responsiveness} \]
Table 1. OLS Regression of Safety on Diversity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>1.07</td>
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<td>0.34</td>
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<td>State Partisanship</td>
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<td>.01</td>
<td>-0.75</td>
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R²: .04 .05
N: 48 48
* p<.05. Standard errors in parentheses.

Table 2. Regression of Centrism on Competitiveness and Incumbency.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Incumbent</td>
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Adjusted R²: .06
N: 190

Standard errors in parentheses.
p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 Two tailed test.
Table 3. Regression of Responsiveness on Competitiveness.

<table>
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<td>Safety x Opinion</td>
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<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.003)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Incumbent x Opinion</td>
<td>.017**</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.006)</td>
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<td>State Partisanship</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(.004)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Population</td>
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</table>

Standard errors in parentheses.
p<.05, **p< .01, ***p<.001 Two tailed test.
Table 4. Regression of Roll Call Voting Conservatism (D NOMINATE) on Competitiveness Measures and Controls.

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.092)</td>
<td>(.093)</td>
<td>(.096)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Safety x</td>
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<td>.008***</td>
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<td>-.018</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(.069)</td>
<td>(.074)</td>
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<td>Seniority</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(.004)</td>
<td>(.004)</td>
<td>(.004)</td>
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<td>State</td>
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<td>-.005*</td>
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<td>Partisanship</td>
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<td>(.003)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Years to</td>
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<td>.020</td>
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<td>(.02)</td>
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<td>Adjusted R²</td>
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<td>.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
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Standard errors in parentheses.
* p<.05, **p< .01. Two tailed test.
Appendix A. Regression of Responsiveness on Competitiveness (as measured using the PSES Opinion Measure).

<table>
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<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>(.116)</td>
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<td>Safety x Opinion</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>(.015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent x Opinion</td>
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<td>(.022)</td>
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<td>State Party Identification</td>
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<td>(.004)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>-.023</td>
<td>(.08)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adjusted R² .01
N 190

Standard errors in parentheses. p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 Two tailed test.

Appendix B. Regression of Roll Call Voting Conservatism (D NOMINATE) on Competitiveness as measured using the PSES Opinion Measure.

<table>
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<th>1988</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>1992</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>.026</td>
<td>-.103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety x Opinion</td>
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<td>.182</td>
<td>.197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
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<td>-.045</td>
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<td>Seniority</td>
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<td>-.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>State Party Identification</td>
<td>-.01**</td>
<td>-.007*</td>
<td>-.008*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Years to Election</td>
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<td>-.038</td>
<td>.016</td>
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Adjusted R² .09 .09 .07
N 96 96 96

Standard errors in parentheses. * p<.05, **p<.01 Two tailed test.