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Party Images and Candidate-Centered Campaigns in 1996: What's Money Got to Do with It?

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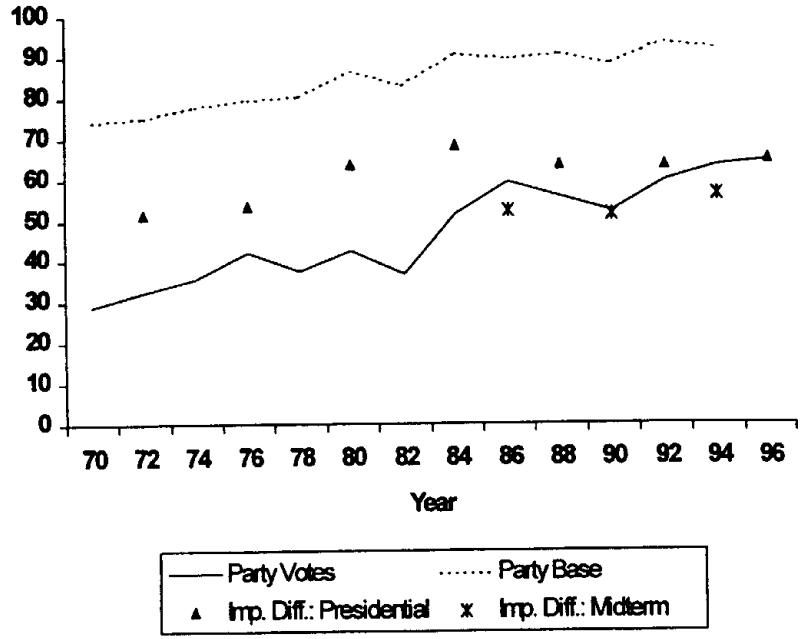
Strong ideas and strong parties may be important for the collective health of the American political system, but are they helpful to the political health of the individual American congressional candidate? By now, political scientists have convincingly shown that a candidate-centered campaign is the electoral vehicle of choice for most congressional hopefuls and incumbents (Fenno 1978; Cain, Forejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Jacobson 1992: 88–93; Alford and Brady 1993; Rivers and Fiorina 1989; see Squire 1995 for an overview of the literature). Candidate-centered does not mean that a candidate refuses party assistance in campaign funding or strategy but that the candidate seeks to establish an image with the voters largely independent of the candidate's party label: the candidate, not the party, should be the center of voters' attention. Sharing the party's general predisposition toward issues, the candidate aims to appear distinctive from the party on specific policy stances. Successfully executed, candidate-centered campaigning evolves into an "incumbency advantage" by which incumbents can stay afloat when political currents threaten to capsize their party. Depending on their perception of the currents in the electoral environment, including both district and activist sentiment, candidates might choose either to eschew or pursue a more moderate image than the party.[1] Following one of the most contentious and ideologically polarized Congresses in recent decades, a Congress during which charges of "extremism" flew with regularity, establishing a moderate image may have been even more important—and more difficult—for candidates in 1996 than in other years.

If the public were unaware of this party polarization and conflict, the candidates' job might be easier. But the public *has* noted the recent changes in party politics. Figure 20.1 presents two measures of party discipline in the House—the percentage of party votes and the percentage of House members

Figure 20.1 Party Differences and Public Perception of Party Differences (in Percentages)



Sources: *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* (party votes); Fleisher and Bond (1996) (party base); National Election Study (important differences).

that are part of the party "base"—and the proportion of the public perceiving important differences between the parties.[2] Overall, the public's perception of increased party differences has reflected the reality in Congress. For political scientists, particularly those of a responsible party bent, such news is welcome. For candidates interested in candidate-centered campaigning, however, such improved clarity is not necessarily a blessing. With stronger public images about the parties, and with the images of the two major parties diverging, candidates may face a more difficult job convincing the public that they are "in" their party but not entirely "of" their party.

Can candidates solve this problem by fooling voters, by pretending to be something they are not? Scholars have acknowledged that at times confusion might be an optimal electoral strategy, but such a strategy is unlikely to work over time or for most candidates. Box-Steffensmeier and Franklin (1995; see also Franklin 1991) show that an incumbent's roll call voting record (the "long campaign") cumulates into highly accurate voter perceptions of the incumbent and contributes significantly to the voter's decision on election day. Working from a political psychology approach, Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau (1995) similarly conclude that voters construct a running tally of information about candidates that significantly influences their voting decisions. Voters are particularly sensitive to candidate stands that differ from those expected for members of the candidate's party.

If candidates do intend to create an image that is distinct from their parties, abundant financial resources would make the task more attainable. Financial resources in 1996 were, if nothing else, plentiful compared with previous election cycles. Spending a large sum of money increases a candidate's probability of winning an election, although there exists some disagreement about the relative advantages accruing to incumbents and challengers (Green and Krasno 1988; Jacobson 1992; Goidel and Gross 1994; Squire 1995; Kenny and McBurnett 1992, 1994).[3] But between the campaign spending and the election outcome lies the black box of public attitudes and opinions (Jacobson 1992: 114–32; Kenny and McBurnett 1997). Campaign spending could provide a means for candidates to divorce themselves from the stereotypes and images associated with their political parties. Ironically, if spending places a wedge between public perceptions of candidates and parties, then party assistance to candidate advertising and mobilizing would separate public perceptions of parties and candidates. If candidates in 1996 could buy themselves an image of moderation, a party intent on building the brand label would need to spend millions of dollars to counteract the effect of the spending of their own candidates. Not only would such behavior mislead voters, it would also undermine the possibility of responsible parties.

Such fears were misplaced in 1996. Candidates did establish images distinct from their parties, and these images were typically more moderate than the party. But candidates were generally not able to spend their way to moderation, and incumbents were not able to fool the voters. Responsible parties face many obstacles, but the spending of candidates does not appear to be one of them. Candidate-centered campaigns and responsible political parties need not be inherently at odds. During the 1996 campaign, incumbent spending improved public accuracy regarding the incumbent's ideology, and that ideology, even if distinctive from the incumbent's party, was usually in accordance with the party. Candidate-centered campaigning conducted through campaign spending can reinforce rather than erode the party and party image building.

Like Their Parties, Only Less So

If candidates are separating themselves from their parties, we should see that survey respondents place parties and candidates at different points on ideological and issue scales. Although the public perceives an increasingly polarized party atmosphere (see Figure 20.1), candidates in 1996 proved remarkably effective at making a candidate-centered case. The 1996 National Election Study (NES) asked respondents to place themselves, the parties, and the congressional candidates on preference scales concerning general ideology, government spending and services, defense spending, and permissive versus restrictive abortion regulations. On all four issue and ideology items in Table 20.1, respondents see the Democratic and Republican Parties anchoring the left and right, respectively, with the Democratic and Republican candidates closer to the center (value of 4 on the seven-point scale used in all but the abortion item) but still on the "correct" side of the scale.[4] The four-point abortion item differs from the other items in that it does not permit a true middle value and each value is given specific content in the NES question, but the general pattern of more moderate candidates prevails.

Expected differences between candidates and parties hold up for different kinds of races and different kinds of candidates. In only four of the thirty-two sets of comparisons is the candidate scaled at a less moderate position than the party—three of these exceptions concern the Democrats and defense; two of the four are in the open seat races. Looked at a different way, respondents, on the average, position parties farther from the center than they do candidates, and they place Democratic and Republican candidates about the same distance away from the center. *T*-tests of the party or candidate deviation from the center show that these deviations are statistically significant. Overall, on Election Day 1996, the public saw a wider gap between the abstract Democratic and Republican Parties than between the concrete Democratic and Republican candidates listed on the ballot.

One might object that these mean scale placements obscure the fact that in some districts candidates were perceived as more "extreme" than their parties. In percentage terms, a plurality of respondents saw candidates of both parties, but especially Republicans, as more moderate than their parties, and larger percentages placed the candidates rather than the parties at or within one unit of the scale center.[5] Party identification made little difference, but Republican candidates were especially effective in convincing independents that they were not as extreme as the Republican Party itself, with over half the Independents placing the Republican candidate to the left of the party. In fact, most House Republicans also sought to burnish their moderate image by moving to the left in 1996. Fifty-seven percent of House Republicans had more liberal Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) scores in 1996 than in 1995, while only 14 percent became more conservative; the

Table 20.1 Mean Placement of Parties and Candidates on Ideology and Issue Scales, 1996

District Configuration	Democratic		Republican	
	Party	Candidate	Party	Candidate
All districts:				
Ideology	3.18	3.51	5.09	4.80
Government services and spending	2.90	3.29	4.93	4.62
Defense spending	3.79	3.81	4.74	4.37
Abortion	1.69	1.92	2.81	2.47
Democratic incumbent:				
Ideology	3.41	3.61	5.18	4.52
Government services and spending	2.97	3.28	4.96	4.45
Defense spending	3.92	3.86	4.80	4.27
Abortion	1.79	1.93	2.81	2.37
Republican incumbent:				
Ideology	2.97	3.35	5.00	4.89
Government services and spending	2.84	3.34	4.93	4.65
Defense spending	3.65	3.61	4.72	4.42
Abortion	1.60	1.76	2.79	2.52
Open seat:				
Ideology	3.36	3.29	4.99	4.89
Government services and spending	2.89	3.23	4.78	4.83
Defense spending	3.95	3.96	4.62	3.93
Abortion	1.75	2.34	2.88	2.40

Note: Entries are mean placements by respondents on a seven-point scale (except abortion, which has a four-point scale), with higher values indicating more conservative placement. Items are from the 1996 National Election Study. *N* varies from 544 to 1577.
Source: 1996 National Election Study.

remainder were unchanged. Like Republicans, Democrats attempted to moderate their image in 1996. A plurality of Democratic House members, 45 percent, moved rightward on the ADA index in 1996 to establish their moderate bona fides; the remainder split evenly between those moving left and those staying ideologically put.

Candidate-centered campaigning appears able to soften the party image for many candidates, but that does not mean the public sees no difference between the candidates or between the parties. *T*-test comparisons show that the public perceived significant differences in many ways in 1996: candidates differed from their parties, candidates differed from each other, and the parties differed most of all. The procedure here is to measure the gap between the placement of the Democratic and Republican candidates, for example, on the ideology or issue scales and compare it with zero. If the public did not perceive differences between the candidates, then the perceived gaps should not differ significantly from zero. Table 20.2 indicates that across the board the gaps between the candidates and the gaps between the parties are statistically significant. Now, one can legitimately question

Table 20.2 Perceived Issue and Ideology Gaps Between Candidates and Parties

	Gap between Respondent Placement of			
	D and R Parties	D and R Candidates	D Candidate and D Party	R Candidate and R Party
Ideology	2.70 (71.76)	1.99 (25.26)	1.15 (26.45)	1.07 (28.01)
Govt. services and spending	2.52 (59.89)	1.83 (20.30)	.97 (21.99)	.93 (23.06)
Defense spending	1.90 (50.01)	1.23 (14.28)	.95 (19.43)	.83 (19.99)
Abortion	1.41 (54.93)	1.21 (16.45)	.64 (15.75)	.79 (15.45)

Note: D = Democratic; R = Republican. Entries are mean gaps (absolute values) between respondents' placements of the two parties or candidates on seven-point scales (except a four-point scale for abortion). *T*-values in parentheses. All *t*-values are significant at .001, two-tailed.
Source: 1996 National Election Study.

whether a gap of 1.2 points (on a seven-point scale) between candidates on defense issues amounts to much substantively, but it is a consistently perceived, nonrandom gap.

What Incumbents Do and What the Public Sees

It appears, then, that following the highly polarized Congress of 1995–1996, candidate-centered campaigning worked its desired magic: to the typical voter, the Republican or Democratic candidate in the district did not look as "extreme" as the Republican or Democratic Party writ large. If a candidate is indeed more moderate than the party, then campaigning is simply producing a more informed electorate. If, however, a candidate convinces voters that he or she is more moderate or centrist than the party when this is not true, then campaigning produces a magical result of which Disney could be proud. To what extent are candidate-centered campaigners misinforming rather than informing the public?

To answer this question, I take ADA ratings of House members from 1995 to 1996. These ratings provide both a mean measure of each party's ideology and a measure of how far a candidate deviates from the party mean. Because ADA ratings apply only to incumbents and not challengers, this analysis is restricted to the former group. A Democratic candidate is considered "the same as" his or her party if his or her ADA score falls within plus or minus eight points of the mean party ADA score. A Republican candidate is considered "the same as" his or her party if his or her ADA score falls within plus or minus 5.5 points of the mean party ADA score. These ranges represent one-half of a standard deviation for the two parties, respectively. Table 20.3 presents the ADA's rating of individual Democratic and Republican incumbents compared with the ADA's mean rating for all incumbents of the respective party. The public is most accurate when the candidate-party relationship exudes moderation—namely, Democratic candidates who are more conservative than the party as a whole and Republican candidates who are more liberal than the party as a whole. Those candidates who are less "extreme" than their party appear to do a good job making sure the public understands the distinction.

In what some might consider the worst case scenario—a Democratic candidate perceived as being to the left of the Republican Party or a Republican candidate perceived as being to the right of the Republican Party—the public perception is askew, especially for Republican candidates. Candidates that are even more "extreme" than their party appear to do a very good job convincing the public otherwise. Republican candidates who were more conservative than the party overall (as measured by the ADA) were perceived this way by only one in four members of the public. Although the numbers

Table 20.3 ADA Ideological Rating versus Respondent's Perception of Incumbent's Ideology

Incumbent's ADA Voting Rating	Respondent Perceives Incumbent as (in percentages) More Conservative Than Party	Same as Party	More Liberal Than Party	N
Democratic incumbents:				
More conservative than the party	50.4	19.2	30.4	125
Same as the party	39.7	39.7	20.6	131
More liberal than the party	29.1	31.0	39.9	158
Republican Incumbents:				
More conservative than the party	24.0	37.2	38.8	258
Same as the party	21.8	33.1	45.1	142
More liberal than the party	19.7	34.8	45.5	132

Note: Percentages total to 100 percent across rows. For Democrats, "same as the party" means within eight points of the party mean; for Republicans, within 5.5 points of the party mean.
Source: *Almanac of American Politics* for ADA scores.

are less impressive for Democratic candidates, the finding is the same: Democratic candidates who were more liberal than their party were so perceived by 40 percent of the public. Candidate-centered campaigning, then, seems both to inform and misinform voters about the relationship of candidates and parties. Candidates who are in fact more moderate than their parties are reasonably successful in conveying this to the public. Yet those candidates who are more extreme than their parties are also very successful in defusing that perception among the public. Given the extremism label pasted on the Republican Party, it is notable that no matter whether a Republican's ADA score was more conservative, more liberal, or the same as the party's, a plurality of voters saw the incumbent as more liberal than the party. Even controlling for the respondent's ideology does not seriously alter this pattern.[6]

Influences on Public Perceptions

The public in 1996 separated candidates from parties and placed candidates closer to the ideological center. Why? I consider a range of factors in addressing this question, but my primary focus is on the role of money in

campaigns. As discussed earlier, 1996 provided candidates with substantial financial resources. Candidates might argue that the resources were insufficient, and they might even be right, but the volume of dollars was nonetheless remarkable. Still, candidate spending created a larger perceived gap between the party and the candidate only in particular circumstances for challengers and not at all for incumbents. Similarly, incumbents who are more extreme than their parties do not mislead the public about this relationship by using campaign cash. To the contrary, incumbent spending increases voter awareness of the incumbent's policy preferences.

Multiple regression permits a systematic identification of the significant influences on public placements of candidates and parties. I look at two aspects of these placements: distance and incorrect placement. For distance, I use the gap (in absolute value) between the respondent's placement of the candidate and the candidate's party on issue and ideology scales. For incorrect placement, I use dichotomous dependent variables that indicate whether the respondent was mistaken in his or her perception of the incumbent's position relative to the party and whether an incumbent with a liberal or conservative voting record was placed as a centrist. If, for example, the incumbent's ADA record places him or her to the left of the party but the respondent perceives the incumbent to be to the right of the party, this would be counted as a mistaken placement for the first dichotomous variable. For the second dichotomous variable, I convert the incumbent's 1995–1996 ADA score into a seven-point scale analogous to the seven-point scales used in the NES. An incumbent whose roll call voting record places him or her at points 1, 2, 6, or 7 on the seven-point ADA scale but who is placed at points 3, 4, or 5 by the respondent on the seven-point NES ideology scale would be counted as a mistaken placement.

Several factors might be related to distance and incorrect placement. These factors can be clustered into one group that concerns the incumbent and challenger and a second group that concerns the respondent's orientation toward the candidates and toward politics. In the first cluster, the incumbent's voting record—the "long campaign"—should matter. More moderate incumbents should be perceived as more distant from the party. I measure the incumbent's roll call moderation by folding the incumbent's average ADA score from 1995 and 1996. The original ADA scale runs from 0 (conservative) to 100 (liberal). Folding produces a scale from "extreme" (0) to "moderate" (50) roll call voting. I also include a dummy variable that is 1 when the incumbent is either a conservative Republican or a liberal Democrat and 0 otherwise.[7] Finally, education alone should not influence the size of the perceived gap between a candidate and party, but education may condition whether an individual picks up on cues about the incumbent's voting record. To test this possibility, I include an interaction between the respondent's level of education and the folded ADA score.

As discussed, candidate campaign spending might also influence distance and mistaken placement by increasing the first and increasing the probability of the latter. Specifically, spending by the candidate would be expected to increase the perceived distance, and spending by the opponent would be expected to decrease the distance. One much-noted problem with using incumbent and challenger spending data in regression analysis is that the two variables are endogenous: each influences the level of the other. The remedy for this problem is an instrumental variables, two-stage least-squares procedure. I follow that procedure in the analysis presented here.[8] To disentangle the effects of spending and incumbency, I include a dummy variable that indicates whether the incumbent has been in office more than one term.[9]

The second cluster of variables concerns the respondent's orientations toward the candidate, the candidate's party, and politics. Party identification ranges from strong supporters of the challenger's party to strong supporters of the incumbent's party. Strong partisans may be less likely to divorce candidates from their parties. A feeling thermometer measures affect for either the challenger or the incumbent; the expectation here is that candidates that are well liked are more likely to be seen as distant from the party. Finally, a respondent's perceptions about the candidate and party might be influenced by the gap that the respondent perceives between him- or herself and the candidate's party. Previous studies suggest that projection or rationalization by respondents would increase the perceived distance between the candidate and the party as the gap between the respondent and the candidate's party grows.

The respondent's orientations toward politics may also influence distance and incorrect placement. I include a measure that asks respondents whether they feel politics is complicated, confusing, and hard to understand—respondents feeling this way may be more likely to perceive gaps between parties and candidates. Another measure asks how closely respondents have followed news about the campaign. Respondents who profess little concern might be expected to be less likely to match party and candidate stands and, therefore, more likely to assume distance and to place incumbents incorrectly.

Can Money Buy Love?

Campaign spending by incumbents and challengers has no significant impact on the perceived distance between incumbents and their parties. On the other hand, Table 20.4 shows that the incumbent's voting record does affect the public's perception. Incumbents with more moderate ADA scores are placed more distantly from their parties on overall ideology as are "extreme" (liberal) Democrats and "extreme" (conservative) Republicans. Perhaps the clearest pattern in Table 20.4 is that the respondent's political orientation significantly conditions how the respondent perceives the relationship between the incumbent and the party. The stronger one feels that politics is too complicated, the more likely one is to see parties and candidates as separate and distinct. The stronger one's identification with the incumbent's party, the more likely one is to place the party and incumbent similarly rather than distancing the two. Strong partisans appear to hold their candidates to the party standard.[10]

Table 20.4 Gaps between Scale Placements of Incumbents and Parties, 1996 House Elections

	Gap between Incumbent and Party on			
Independent Variables	Ideology	Government Services & Spending	Defense Spending	Abortion
Candidate related:				
Incumbent spending (in 10,000)	-.000	.002	-.003	.001
Challenger spending (in 10,000)	-.002	-.003	.003	.005
Incumbent is post-freshman	-.092	.092	.074	-.049
Incumbent is liberal Democrat or conservative Republican	.334***	.176*	.010	.091
Folded ADA score	.016***	.008	.009	.005
Folded ADA score × respondent's education level	-.000	.001	-.000	-.002
Respondent Related:				
Politics is too complicated	.080***	.128***	.074**	.063*
Attention to news about campaign	-.092**	-.080**	-.042	.056
Party identification	-.047***	-.062***	-.040**	-.046**
Feeling thermometer: incumbent	.002	.004**	.002	.004**
Scale gap between respondent and incumbent's party	.020	-.020	.066**	.096***
Constant	.365*	.311	.362	.584**
Adjusted R^2	.08	.11	.13	.08
Standard error	.902	.891	.889	.824
F	5.820***	7.152***	6.997***	3.372***

* $p \leq .10$.
** $p \leq .05$.
*** $p \leq .01$.
Source: 1996 National Election Study.

For challengers, campaign spending has a significant impact on issue scale placement but not overall ideology. The findings in Table 20.5 suggest at least a modest relationship between spending by the candidates and the distance respondents see between the challenger and the challenger's party. Most important is the strength of the relationship between spending and the gap in government spending and services, given the importance of this issue area in House elections. The relationship is in the expected direction: the more incumbents spend, the closer respondents link the challenger to the party; the more challengers spend, the more respondents divorce challengers from their party. Consistent with the bulk of the research on campaign spending, this finding suggests that campaign spending is especially important to challengers, who are often unknown to the public and likely to start at the "default" position of being linked closely to party positions. Other relationships for the challenger are sketchy—significant for one or more issues but not others—but are as expected. More attention to the campaign reduces the perceived difference between challengers and parties. The "warmer" one's feelings about the challenger, the more the distance between the challenger and the party. Complicated politics, party identification, and the gap between the respondent and the challenger's party are signed mostly as expected but do not generally reach statistical significance.

Table 20.5 Gaps between Scale Placements of Challengers and Parties, 1996 House Elections

Independent Variables	Gap between Challenger and Party on: Ideology	Government Services & Spending	Defense Spending	Abortion
Candidate related:				
Incumbent spending (in 10,000)	-.003	-.007**	-.006*	-.004*
Challenger spending (in 10,000)	.001	.009**	.009**	.003
Incumbent is postfreshman	.022	.073	-.123	.059
Incumbent is liberal Democrat or conservative Republican	.033	.295	-.075	-.150
Folded ADA score	.005	.006	.006	.012
Folded ADA score × respondent's education level	-.003**	-.001	-.002	-.001
Respondent Related:				
Politics is too complicated	.006	.015	.000	.083*
Attention to news about campaign	-.162**	-.074	-.136**	-.042
Party identification	.015	.042	.032	.007
Feeling thermometer: challenger	.007**	.011***	-.002	.000
Scale gap between respondent and incumbent's party	.007	-.098	.108**	-.000
Constant	.187	.391	.094	1.105**
Adjusted R^2	.09	.19	.19	.02
Standard error	.924	.938	.872	.955
F	2.618***	4.837***	3.740***	1.407

* $p \leq .10$.
** $p \leq .05$.
*** $p \leq .01$.
Source: 1996 National Election Study.

Not only are incumbents unable to distance themselves from their parties using campaign spending, but they also cannot spend their way to an image that varies from their congressional voting behavior. Nor does it appear that they wish to. Table 20.6 shows that campaign spending has a significant impact on the public's mistaken placements of incumbents, but *incumbent campaign spending does not fool the public*. Franklin (1991) notes that it may be more in the challenger's than the incumbent's interest to confuse voters about the incumbent, and that appears to be the case. Whether looking at all incumbents or only at those who might be in 1996's worst case scenario (a Democrat more liberal than the party or a Republican more conservative than the party), incumbent spending *reduces* mistaken placement by the public. Incumbents do not use campaign spending to create a new image distant from the party or to buy an image of moderation. Instead, the more incumbents spend, the more accurate are public perceptions about the incumbent's ideology relative to the party and relative to the center of the political spectrum. Interestingly, the results suggest that incumbent campaign spending would offset the tendency of respondents to place postfreshman incumbents incorrectly relative to the party.

Challenger spending also plays a significant role, making mistaken placement of the incumbent more likely and, as previous research suggests, seeming to produce more bang for the buck. Challengers may conclude that, on the average, incumbents are successful because they are in at least rough accordance with constituency views. If this is correct, then the challenger's chance for victory may depend on confusing the public about the incumbent's relative partisan and ideological positioning. Federal Election Commission data for districts in the 1996 NES sample shows that median challenger spending is nine times higher in districts held by conservative Democrats than in districts held by liberal Democrats, and five times higher in districts held by liberal Republicans than in districts held by conservative Republicans. If these relatively moderate incumbents have captured districts that could plausibly switch party hands, then it would be in the challenger's

Table 20.6 Foolers on the Hill?

Independent Variables	Incumbent Placed Incorrectly Compared with Party[a] All	Incumbent Placed Incorrectly Compared with Party[a] "Extreme"[b]	Incumbent Placed Incorrectly in Ideological Center[c] All	Incumbent Placed Incorrectly in Ideological Center[c] "Extreme"[b]
Candidate Related:				
Incumbent spending (in 10,000)	-.004*	-.006**	-.003*	-.006**
Challenger spending (in 10,000)	.014**	.014*	.008*	.014*
Incumbent is postfreshman	.668**	1.023***	-.413	-.273
Folded ADA score	-.038**	-.057	.005	.100
Folded ADA score × respondent's education level	-.003	-.013	-.001	-.023*
Respondent Related:				
Politics is too complicated	.207**	.351***	.313***	.361***
Attention to news about campaign	.019	-.198*	-.279***	-.207*
Party identification	.057	-.165**	-.026	-.108*
Feeling thermometer: incumbent	-.012**	-.006	.011**	.014**
Scale gap between respondent and incumbent's party	.134*	.244**	-.290***	-.250**
Constant	.349	.114	.831	1.190
Nagelkerke R^2	.15	.18	.15	.19
-2LL	452.876	339.725	565.444	304.976
Percentage correct	74	68	68	70

* $p \leq .10$.
** $p \leq .05$.
*** $p \leq .01$.

[a]Incumbent's ADA score places him or her to one side of the party (left or right), but respondent places incumbent to the other side of the party.

[b]"Extreme" column includes only Democrats whose ADA score is more liberal than the party and Republicans whose ADA score is more conservative than the party. For Democrats, "more liberal" means more than eight points higher than the party mean (in the ADA scale, higher values are more liberal); for Republicans, "more conservative" means more than 5.5 below the party mean.

[c]Incumbent ADA rating is liberal or conservative (points 1, 2, 6, and 7 on a seven-point scale), but respondent places incumbent in the ideological center (points 3, 4, and 5 on a seven-point scale).

Source: 1996 National Election Study.

interest to suggest that the incumbent is not as much of a conservative (in the case of a conservative Democratic incumbent) or as much of a liberal (in the case of a liberal Republican incumbent) as he or she claims.

Looking at the case of "extreme" incumbents (Democrats more liberal than the party, Republicans more conservative than the party) provides one illustration of the impact of spending. What is the probability of an extreme incumbent being mistakenly considered a centrist? I place all nonspending variables at their (rounded) mean values. If challenger spending is placed at its mean value, and if incumbent spending totals $100,000, the probability of a mistaken placement is .40. Increasing incumbent spending to $1,000,000 and leaving challenger spending at its mean value, the probability drops to .28. Varying the challenger's spending induces even sharper effects. With incumbent spending set at its mean and challenger spending at $100,000, the probability of mistaken placement is .28. Pushing challenger spending to $1,000,000 shoots the probability of a mistake to .58. Another way to see the power of challenger spending is to set both the incumbent and challenger's spending to the same amount. If both candidates spend $100,000, the probability of a mistaken placement is .35. When both candidates spend $800,000, however, mistakes become the norm as the probability moves to .51.

They Run, But They Don't Hide

To the public, candidates and parties are alike but different. They are alike in that the Democratic Party and its candidates typically anchor one end of an issue or ideology scale, while the Republican Party and its candidates anchor the other end. They are different in that candidates and parties are usually not placed together in issue or ideological space but are clearly and consistently separated by survey respondents. Candidate-centered campaigning, then, appears to achieve one of its objectives.

But this campaigning has its limits. Incumbents cannot simply buy themselves further distance from their parties. Neither the incumbent's nor the challenger's spending appears able to jar public perceptions of the gap between the incumbent and the party. Particularly for public perceptions of the incumbent's ideology, the roll call voting record over the previous two years creates an image for the candidate that sticks. Public predispositions and orientations toward politics, many of which are likely outside a candidate's control, also can expand and contract the perceived distance between the incumbent and party. Republicans tagged as "extremists" in 1995 and 1996 could not simply buy their way out of that label.

If it does not appear that incumbents can buy "distance" during the fall campaign—that is, distance beyond that existing before the campaign—the

situation for challengers differs somewhat. With less of a public image beyond that provided by the party label, the challenger can and probably should, according to candidate-centered campaign theory, use campaign spending to build some distance from the party. Challengers achieve this result with some success. At the same time, incumbent spending ties the challenger back to his or her party. Challengers may buy themselves some love, but incumbent spending may counteract the challenger's courtship of the public.

Although incumbent spending does not influence the public perception of the distance between the incumbent and the party, this spending does influence whether survey respondents make mistakes in their ideological placement of the incumbent relative to his party and on the ideological scale overall. Incumbents do not fool the public through their campaign spending, nor does it appear they wish to do so. The more the challenger spends, the higher the probability that a respondent will mistakenly place the incumbent's ideological position relative to the incumbent's party or on the ideological scale overall. Additional spending by the incumbent serves to set the record straight.

Of course, these results are based on only one election year. It is possible that 1996, following a remarkably polarized Congress, was atypical. Still, several results reported here are consistent with findings in other studies. Based on that consistency, I put forward implications for campaign finance reform and for responsible parties, even if tentatively. Much discussion followed the 1996 campaign concerning the impact and reform of campaign finance. There may be several good reasons to reform campaign finance, including the excessive time spent fund-raising, the difficulty of defeating well-financed incumbents, and the perception that the system corrupts lawmaking. In previous editions of this volume, I warned that scholars should be careful about associating proficient campaign fund-raising with party "resurgence" or "renewal," because to the *public* success in a campaign finance system perceived as corrupt and dysfunctional was not likely to result in improved views toward parties and the party system (Coleman 1996: 373–74). On the positive side, however, the present study suggests that one thing we cannot say, for 1996 at least, is that incumbents use the campaign finance system to run away from their record. To the contrary, in 1996 incumbent spending helped voters place the incumbent correctly in issue and ideological space. The broader point is that as talk about campaign finance reform proceeds, identifying impacts of the present system other than the probability of voting for or against the incumbent will be important. The health of the democratic system and political discourse, not just whether money makes it easier for incumbents to win, should be the key. We see in the data that incumbent spending had beneficial effects.

Incumbent spending had beneficial effects in another profound respect.

If incumbents do not spend their way to an image distant from their parties, and if their spending clarifies their stances relative to both the party and the ideological center, then candidate-centered campaigning must not be considered entirely incompatible with responsible political parties. This does not mean that candidates did not differ from their parties in 1996—clearly incumbents and challengers did differ from their parties. However, candidates were placed closer to their party position than to the position of their opponent (see Tables 20.1 and 20.2). Challengers used campaign spending to help build an image separate from the party, but incumbents did not do so. Rather than run away from the record, incumbent spending seemed to get voters to run toward the record. Considering the high level of partisanship in the 1995–1996 Congress, this finding suggests that incumbents as candidate-centered campaigners behaved much in the manner one would hope for from responsible political parties.

Candidates in the late 1990s may be only partly at odds with their parties. Challengers spend money to build an image that distances them from the party. However, far more money is spent by incumbents, and that money appears neither to distance the incumbent's public image farther from the party—that is farther than the distance already built by the incumbent's voting record and by the voter's political orientations and predispositions—nor to fool the public about the incumbent's voting record. Parties spend millions of dollars to build a public image, and candidate spending alone does not offset that image.

Notes

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1. The current debate between proponents of proximity and directional theories of voting reinforces the point that neither a moderate nor "extremist" candidate strategy is consistently optimal (Merrill and Grofman 1997; Macdonald and Rabinowitz 1997; Morris and Rabinowitz 1997).

2. Party votes data are from various issues of *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*. The party base consists of those members who are closer to their party's mean Americans for Democratic Action rating than to the opposition party's rating; this measure is from Fleisher and Bond (1996). Perception of important differences between the parties is taken from National Election Studies data.

3. Most accounts suggest that challengers receive the greater marginal gain from spending, but there is some dispute regarding the size of the incumbent-challenger differential and the campaign venues and activities in which the differential grows or shrinks.

4. The abortion item, scaled 1–4, differs from the other items in that it does not permit a true middle value and each value is given specific content in the NES question. Roughly, then, a mean value of 2.5 is an approximate middle value.

5. Only on the four-point abortion scale were a majority of respondents likely to place the parties and their candidates at the same location.

6. Dividing respondents into three self-reported ideological groupings and performing the analysis for each of the Republican scenarios in Table 20.3 produces nine possible scenarios. For seven of these, the plurality public perception was that the Republican incumbent was more liberal than the party. For Democratic incumbents, a plurality of respondents perceives conservative Democrats in six of the nine scenarios.

7. This dummy variable correlates with the folded ADA measure; removing it from the estimation has no significant impact on the results.

8. In addition to the nonspending variables listed in Table 20.4, the instruments included the quality of the challenger, the percentage of college graduates and the median family income in the district, the incumbent's share of the vote in 1994, a dummy variable indicating whether the challenger's party won the district in the 1992 presidential election, the party of the challenger, and dummy variables for the Northeast and West. Other potential problems with the use of campaign spending figures are discussed in Squire (1995: 902), Ansolabehere and Gerber (1994), and Kenny and McBurnett (1997).

9. The number of years the incumbent had held office is another potential form of this variable. Because this alternative did not perform any better than the dummy variable and much of the literature on "incumbency effects" stresses the importance of surviving that first reelection battle, I employ the dummy variable.

10. Because the party's position on a scale can affect the potential size of the candidate-party gap, I include the party's perceived distance from the center as a control variable in Tables 20.4 and 20.5. The problem is that a party placed at point 4 on the scale can differ from the candidate by a maximum of three points, but a party placed at points 1 or 7 could be six points away from the candidate. Including a control for the placement of the party relative to the center of the scale avoids incorrectly attributing causal influence to other variables. The main substantive impact of leaving the control out of the estimations is, not surprisingly, to weaken the significance of party identification and the distance between the respondent and the candidate's party. In all other respects the substantive interpretations are unaffected.

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