

# The Incumbent in the Living Room: The Rise of Television and the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections

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*This study shows that the growth of television contributed to the rise in the incumbency advantage in U.S. House elections during the 1960s. Incumbents received positive coverage throughout their term and were generally more newsworthy and better funded than their challengers during the campaign. Less-educated voters, for whom television presented a new, less demanding source of news, were most affected by local television. Analysis of National Elections Studies data reveals that less-educated respondents were more knowledgeable about the incumbent and more likely to vote for the incumbent in districts with television stations. Aggregate analysis shows that incumbents' vote margins increased in proportion to the number of television stations in their districts.*

“With the cathode-ray tube, the key to every voter’s living room is at last in the Congressman’s hand.”

Russell Baker, *New York Times*, June 27, 1955

“Local outlets have been found by Congressmen to be relatively receptive to tape, film, or telephone reports from the nation’s capital.”

*An Introduction to Service in the U.S. House of Representatives* (Tacheron and Udall 1966, 109)

“Senators and Representatives are making like Hollywood for the home folks these days at cut-rate prices.”

Robert E. Baker, *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, February 13, 1955

Thirty-five years after the sudden rise in incumbent vote margins in the 1960s was first noticed (Erikson 1971; Mayhew 1974), we do not fully understand the reasons for this increase. Scholars have offered several explanations, including increased constituency service (e.g., Fiorina 1977a), partisan dealignment (e.g., Cover 1977; Nelson 1978), redistricting (e.g., Cox and Katz 2002), and greater electoral impact of candidate quality (Cox and Katz 1996). It has gone largely unnoticed that the decade preceding the rise in the incumbency advantage also saw the

greatest expansion of television stations across the country. In the 15 years after 1952, when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ended the four-year television freeze<sup>1</sup> and resumed licensing new stations, the number of congressional districts with television stations in their boundaries more than doubled. Even though these two developments occurred almost simultaneously, researchers have not yet considered the possibility of a causal connection between them.<sup>2</sup> A link between the spread of local TV stations and the rise in incumbent vote margins offers a new way to look at this old puzzle in the congressional literature.

In this paper, I present evidence that the two developments are indeed related. The emerging medium was uniquely popular with most Americans and provided representatives with a new and efficient way to reach their constituents. Congress had its own television studios, which allowed members to produce reports professionally and well below market rates. The local stations in members’ home districts were happy to broadcast these reports in their nightly newscasts or as stand-alone programs because they were inexpensive and helped to fulfill the FCC’s public

<sup>1</sup>Between 1948 and 1952, the FCC did not license new TV stations in order to draft a comprehensive policy for the expansion of TV.

<sup>2</sup>Lawrence and Smith (1995) raise the possibility of a link between use of new campaign technologies and the rising incumbency advantage in the 1960s. In a recent working paper, Ansolabehere, Snowberg, and Snyder (2004) examine the effect of television on vote shares for Senate and gubernatorial incumbents.

affairs requirement. Even before the campaign started, local TV could thus help incumbents increase recognition at home and give their congressional activities a positive spin. During the campaign, a spending advantage, greater newsworthiness, and the continued opportunities to insert their own pre-recorded statements into local newscasts added to the incumbent's dominance of the airwaves.

## Local TV News in the 1950s and 60s

The main venue for television's direct impact on congressional elections was not network news, but local news and public affairs programming. The most prominent members of Congress received network coverage, but network news largely ignored representatives and senators without an important committee chair (Adams and Ferber 1977; Cook 1986; Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992). For House members to benefit from the new medium, they had to rely on local television. Local newscasts in the 1950s and 60s were widely watched, generally attracting even larger audiences than the already very popular network news (Epstein 1973, 87). The combined Nielsen rating for early evening local newscasts in the top 100 Nielsen markets was 40 in 1965 and 43 in 1975 (calculated from Parkman 1982), indicating that 40% (in 1965) and 43% (in 1975) of all television households watched the early local news on an average weekday evening.

In its early years, local news was not the blood-and-guts spectacle that it is today (Hamilton 1998, 2004). Today's ubiquitous "Eyewitness" and "Action" news formats became commonplace only in the 70s. In the first 20 years of local news, "nearly 100 percent of its content had consisted of just these two subjects, crime and government" (Allen 2001, 208). One early content analysis of the six Los Angeles television stations (Lyle and Wilcox 1963) provides a snapshot of local news on two days in 1961: Almost 60% of all news stories covered political news, many of them on domestic issues, including local and state government. In 1973, the network affiliates in New York broadcast about 70% hard news stories in their local newscasts (Dominick, Wurtzel, and Lometti 1975). And in a systematic study of 10 local TV stations in Pennsylvania, Adams (1978) finds that news about local and state politics filled almost two-thirds of the local newscasts. The heavy emphasis on local politics was evident for stations in different communities, media markets of different size, and stations with and without network affiliation.

FCC licensing rules were one reason for a heavy focus on local and state politics, as they required a

certain amount of local TV stations' total airtime to be devoted to news and public affairs programming (Federal Communications Commission 1946; Graber 1980, 42). Although FCC regulations were imprecise and confusing, in practice many stations devoted more than the required airtime to local news and public affairs. In a survey of local stations published by the FCC in 1973, the median of the 50 VHF stations with the highest revenues devoted 15.5% to news and public affairs.<sup>3</sup> In short, "every city graced with a new TV station also had a new source of local news" (Allen 2001, 14). Low budgets for news, the technological limitations of early television, and the expense of film and cameras made talking head coverage of government the easiest and cheapest way to fill the nightly local news.

## The Symbiosis between Incumbents and Local TV Stations

Enter the local representative in Washington. House members could offer exactly what local stations wanted: cheap, professionally produced public affairs coverage with a local angle. In 1953, the government-owned radio production facilities were equipped to handle television, so members of Congress could produce reports for their districts. In 1959, 160 representatives used the studios weekly or biweekly, another 110 less often (Brown 1959). They recorded both short segments to be inserted into local newscasts and stand-alone programs which were usually 15 minutes long. The number of regular users rose to about 300 in 1964 (Broadcasting 1964), and to 353 in 1973 (Bagdikian 1974). The state heavily subsidized the recording facilities. Legislators paid production fees that were considerably below market rates—by a factor of 20 or greater, according to some estimates (Baker 1955; Otten 1957). "To produce one print of a five-minute film will cost about \$12. It might easily cost several hundred dollars, if the Congressman had to go outside and pay union rates" (MacNeil 1968, 248). Representatives used their "stationary fund" to pay for production fees and received additional help from their parties, including yearly production allowances.

Local television stations gladly broadcast these reports from Washington because they helped fulfill the FCC's public affairs requirement without deplet-

<sup>3</sup>The median for the next 50 VHF stations was 13.9%. Annual Programming Reports filed with the FCC in the mid-70s revealed similar numbers (Simmons 1978, 247 fn. 207).

ing their scarce news budgets. It was the ideal environment for incumbents in Washington to get free airtime back home: "For \$4.40 a Congressman can make a one-minute TV film. For a couple of dollars more he can have it shipped back home by air express where a local channel will fit it into a regular newscast as part of its public service program. Many Representatives do this as a weekly routine" (Goodman 1955, 14). The longer segments were broadcast as freestanding interview shows. By one estimate in 1959, half of all House members had weekly or monthly interview shows on local stations in their home districts (Brown 1959). By 1964, 60% of representatives regularly used free time offered by their local stations back home, according to a survey of House members conducted by the magazine *Broadcasting* (Broadcasting 1964). According to another estimate (Robertson 1965), more than three-quarters had "regular programs" back home in 1965. Incumbents thus received airtime not only during local newscasts, but on stations' other political programs as well. MacNeil even reports instances where local stations reimbursed House members for their purchase of film and other production expenses since their representative was "acting as our reporter on Washington activities" (1968, 248).

As a result of the symbiosis between local TV stations and members of Congress, incumbents with a television station back home presumably entered the campaign season with an advantage in name recognition and favorability ratings.<sup>4</sup> But it did not end there:

Of course, these programs [produced by incumbents in Washington] are presented as a public service only until the Congressman officially files for the upcoming elections. Then he must pay for time over his local channel, just as his opponent must pay for it. But, unlike the fellow who is trying to unseat him, he still has access to government production service at very nominal fees, and, more important, he has a long head start on the contender. The incumbent's election-day benefit from his regular appearances in his constituents' living rooms between elections is incalculable. (Goodman 1955, 14)

In addition to obtaining plenty of free news coverage during their term, incumbents were in a better position to use the new medium during election campaigns. (The equal time restrictions that led to suspension of freestanding programs during the campaign did not apply to short film clips produced by incumbents that stations inserted into their local

newscasts.) Local news generally devoted more coverage to incumbents than challengers during the campaign because they are more newsworthy (e.g., Cook 1989; Robinson 1981). And this local news coverage was usually much less critical than national news (Mickelson 1989, 161; Robinson 1981). Finally, incumbents' campaign funds tended to exceed those of challengers considerably, allowing them to secure an advantage in paid media as well (Jacobson 1975, 785; Jacobson 2004).<sup>5</sup> In short, incumbents should have obtained greater benefits from local TV stations in their districts than challengers, both before and during the campaign.

Local television was a particularly important source of news for less-educated segments of the population. For people who had difficulties reading newspapers or magazines in particular, news on television represented a new opportunity to learn about politics. It required less attention and cognitive effort to pick up political information (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992; Singer 1980). Television news decreased the gap between well and poorly informed news viewers by presenting political information in a form easily processed by those less educated or less interested (Eveland and Scheufele 2000; Kwak 1999). In a national survey conducted in 1960 (Steiner 1963), almost 50% of the respondents with the least education picked television as the medium that gives them "the clearest understanding of the candidates and issues in national elections," while less than 15% of the most educated did so. Thirty-five percent of the least educated respondents said that television was the medium that "presents things most intelligently," while less than 5% of the most educated said so. Several studies even found that less-educated viewers watched more news programs than more educated viewers (Bower 1973, 132; Robinson 1976; Steiner 1963).

Together, previous research and early television practice lead to the following hypotheses:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Among less-educated constituents, television increased basic knowledge about their representative in Congress (but not about his or her challenger) because the less educated relied most heavily (and exclusively) on television for their political information.*

*H<sub>2</sub>: Local TV stations in a district increased the incumbency advantage because subsidized pro-*

<sup>4</sup>A large part of the pro-incumbent effect of television is thus likely to have accrued before the campaign started. Even safe incumbents, who are infrequently covered in modern campaigns (Clarke and Evans 1983; Kahn and Kenney 1999), should have reaped the benefits of television.

<sup>5</sup>Paid advertising in the form of 30-second commercials was not yet common in the 1950s. Congressmen would often buy longer chunks of airtime, up to 15 minutes, to broadcast pre-produced speeches or other programs (for examples, see Goodman 1955).

*duction facilities in Congress, greater newsworthiness, and a spending advantage all made it easier for incumbents to send (paid and unpaid) messages. This effect was most pronounced among less-educated voters.*

## Research Design

Incumbent vote margins in U.S. House elections rose sharply in the 1960s (e.g. Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2000; Gelman and King 1990; Levitt and Wolfram 1997). When measured in terms of incumbent vote share, the incumbency advantage jumped from 2 or 3 percentage points in the early 1950s (and even lower levels before then) to around 8 points in the second half of the 60s. To test the hypothesis that the growth of television contributed to this jump, I conduct parallel analyses at the individual and aggregate level. At the individual level, I examine whether the presence of local television stations increased people's likelihood of voting for the incumbent, using cross-sectional survey data. At the aggregate level, I assess whether incumbents did better in congressional districts with television stations. While the main reason for using both individual and aggregate data is to verify results using different methodologies, each approach also has a unique advantage. Analysis of survey data makes it possible to examine not only voting behavior, but also knowledge of the candidates. Aggregate analysis does not have to rely on self-reported votes, but instead examines the effect of local television on the vote as measured by official vote statistics.

The unit of analysis in the aggregate data set is the congressional district. The data set covers House elections between 1948 and 1970. District-level vote returns and information about the candidates running in the district come from King's (1994) data set of congressional election results. The incumbent vote share is calculated as the percentage of the two-party vote. I exclude uncontested elections and representatives elected by the state population at large (except in states that elect only one representative). Since redistricting biases aggregate estimates of the incumbency advantage, I exclude redistricted districts from the aggregate analysis. Individual-level analyses include controls for redistricting.<sup>6</sup> As a "considerable

<sup>6</sup>In the individual-level analysis, some respondents in redistricted districts choose between a "new" incumbent and a challenger. It is not necessary to discard these observations, but a control for redistricting is required to pick up the effect of potentially lower familiarity with the new incumbent.

number of solidly entrenched Democratic representatives and senators from the one-party South (. . .) did not have to rely heavily on this medium [TV] to maintain themselves in office" (Chester 1969, 163), all models include a control variable for Southern states.<sup>7</sup> If the presence of local television is correlated with challenger quality—either because it deters or attracts strong challengers, or for reasons unrelated to television—incumbent vote shares in districts with local stations could be higher even in the absence of changed voting behavior. While there is little indication of such a correlation, I include challenger quality as a control variable to account for this possibility.<sup>8</sup> Quality of the challenger is defined as having previously held elective office (Cox and Katz 1996; Jacobson 2004).

The incumbent's seniority is included as a control because more senior members of Congress may more successfully attract news coverage. For the same reason, I collected data on other indicators of newsworthiness that have been shown to affect network news coverage (Cook 1989, 62): party leadership positions (Speaker, majority leader, minority leader, or whip) and service as chair or ranking minority member on a major standing congressional committee.<sup>9</sup> As urban districts are more likely than rural areas to have several television stations, I include the geographical size of the district<sup>10</sup> and, in the individual-level analysis, the size of the respondent's hometown.<sup>11</sup> With these controls in the model, it is unlikely that the television variable picks up possible changes in voting behavior of urban residents that are not related to the presence of local stations. Finally, all individual-level analyses include a variety of other controls variables unavailable in the aggregate analysis, including education, age, and race.

<sup>7</sup>The South is defined as Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Alaska, Hawaii, and the District of Columbia are excluded from the analysis.

<sup>8</sup>I would like to thank Gary Jacobson for providing his data on challenger quality and David Brady for the redistricting data.

<sup>9</sup>I included the following committees: Appropriations, Rules, Ways and Means, Agriculture, Armed Services, Interstate and Foreign Commerce (later Energy and Commerce), Foreign Affairs, and Judiciary. Data on committee positions are from Garrison Nelson, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1947–1992* (available on Charles Stewart's homepage at MIT).

<sup>10</sup>Data on size of the district comes from Adler's (2002) data set.

<sup>11</sup>This variable, included in the NES Cumulative Data File (CF0011), distinguishes central cities, suburban areas, and "rural, small towns, outlying and adjacent areas."

I created the measure of local television coverage as follows. The *Broadcasting Yearbooks* (Broadcasting Publications 1958, 1961, 1971) contain data on the commercial television stations in operation in a county at a particular time. I then used *The Historical Atlas of United States Congressional Districts, 1789–1983* (Martis, Lord, and Rowles 1982) to map counties onto congressional districts, thus providing the number of television stations operating in a congressional district during a particular election year. Each district that includes all or part of a county with a television station in operation in October of an election year was coded as having a local station.<sup>12</sup> Descriptive statistics for the resulting measure are in Table A1.

It seems justified to treat local television as an exogenous variable, since descriptions of the licensing process for new local stations by the FCC do not suggest that House incumbents intervened successfully on behalf of applicants in their constituencies. The most powerful efforts to influence the licensing process came from the broadcasting industry (Baughman 1985; Noll, Peck, and McGowan 1973) and occasionally incumbent senators (Baughman 1985, 18; Bendiner 1957, 29). Once a station had received a license, some congressmen tried to expedite license renewal or to help their home stations switch network affiliation (Baughman 1985, 74). But since the FCC hardly ever revoked licenses for nontechnical reasons (Noll, Peck, and McGowan 1973), this preservation of the status quo does not lead to serious endogeneity concerns either.

The impact of television on voting behavior should have been greatest when the first TV station started operation in a particular area. Once the first station began broadcasting, television entered people's living rooms and became a source for news. If the second station in the district reached the same set of households and showed the same amount of news at the same time, it should have had little additional effect on people's political knowledge. Viewers could now choose between two different newscasts, but still not select entertainment programming during the news hour. The marginal effect of the second station on news exposure and political knowledge could be negative if it broadcast appealing non-news content in

the same time slot that the first station reserved for news. In practice, additional stations in a market did not always perfectly duplicate the programming schedules of the existing stations, but most broadcast newscasts simultaneously in the early and late evening. Just as importantly, the stations in a market did not all have the same reach. The most obvious distinction was between UHF and higher-reach VHF stations, but even for stations that used the same band, reach still depended on the geographical location, the strength of the signal, and the height of their antenna. Hence, the marginal effect of the second station should have been positive because for some viewers in the media market the second station was in fact the first station they could receive (or receive with little noise). At the same time, the effect of the first TV station in the market should have exceeded the marginal effects of subsequent stations. Decreasing but positive marginal effects thus suggest a logarithmic functional relationship between the number of stations in a market and gains in political knowledge. In the following analyses, I use a logarithmic transformation of the number of stations in a district as the independent variable.<sup>13</sup> Empirically, the logged count of TV stations fits the data better than a linear or quadratic specification (i.e., better than assuming constant or negative marginal returns).

To create the individual-level data set, I merged the local TV coverage measure with National Election Studies (NES) data collected between 1958 and 1970.<sup>14</sup> Vote choice, as reported by the respondent in the post-election interview, is coded 1 if the respondent voted for the incumbent, 0 if he or she voted for another candidate. To assess the impact on knowledge about congressional elections, I built two indices. All NES surveys in the period asked respondents which party had the majority in the U.S. House before and after the election. I combined these two items into a three-point index. The second index covers knowledge of the incumbent. The surveys in 1958, 1964, 1966, and 1968 measured recall of the incumbent's name. In races with an incumbent, 44% of the respondents recalled his or her name (compared to 27% who recalled the challenger's name in contested elections).<sup>15</sup> Respondents were also asked which of the two

<sup>13</sup>The exact transformation is  $TV = \ln(TV) + 1$ , if  $TV \neq 0$ ;  $TV = 0$  else.

<sup>14</sup>The NES 1952 and 1962 had to be excluded because they do not contain information on respondents' congressional districts necessary to merge the TV measure.

<sup>15</sup>In absolute terms, the percentage of NES respondents recalling the names of both incumbent and challenger has declined since the late 1960s (Jacobson 2004, 123). In relative terms, the decline

<sup>12</sup>This measure assumes that local television stations in counties that do not overlap with the incumbent's district do not benefit the incumbent even though they might broadcast their signals into some parts of the district. My estimates of the effect of local television are biased downward to the extent that this assumption is wrong and that incumbents did benefit from free or paid media on out-of-district stations.

House candidates was the incumbent. In elections with an incumbent, 64% identified the correct candidate, the rest responded incorrectly or "Don't know." In the 1958 and 1964 NES surveys, respondents were asked if they had heard anything about the candidates running for the U.S. House in their district. Forty-eight percent reported hearing about the incumbent (compared to 27% who had heard about the challenger in contested elections). The incumbent knowledge index combines these three items, generating a four-point index for 1958 and 1964 and a three-point index for other years.

Following the theoretical expectation that the impact of local television should be larger among less-educated people, all models include an interaction between education and the number of stations in the district. The six-point education variable from the NES Cumulative Data File is used (CF0140), which ranges from the lowest level of "eight grades or less" to the highest level of at least a Bachelor's degree. Cognitive skills are most relevant for the present study, because television reduced the demands on message processing, so that reception of political messages increased at lower levels of education. Motivation or interest, on the other hand, are unlikely to have strongly conditioned the reception of political messages from the new medium since newscasts were often scheduled simultaneously on all channels, and most people watched television regardless of what programming was offered (Epstein 1973; LoSciuto 1972). This research therefore employs education as the conditioning variable in order to capture the changes associated with the lower cognitive demands of the new medium of television.<sup>16</sup>

## Results

### Individual-Level Analysis

According to my first hypothesis, television increased the likelihood that less-educated people would learn about the incumbent running for reelection in their district. Local news coverage of Congress and the

of challenger recall was decidedly greater than the decline of incumbent recall. While there is no trend apparent for the period of my analysis, decline of absolute recall is not inconsistent with the hypothesis that television had a pro-incumbent effect even after 1970. Respondents became *more* likely to recall *only the incumbent's name*.

<sup>16</sup>The analyses include political interest as control variable ("Would you say that you were very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in following the political campaigns this year?"). I verified that, as predicted, interest and the number of stations did not have a significant interaction effect on knowledge and voting behavior.

incumbent should also make it more likely for people to know which party holds a majority in the House. In contrast, knowledge about challengers, who did not have access to the congressional television studios and were usually less newsworthy and not as well funded, should not be related to the presence of local stations. I evaluate this hypothesis by regressing the knowledge indices on the (logged) number of television stations in the district and the interaction between local stations and education. The models are estimated by ordered probit since the dependent variables have four levels or less.

The results in Table 1 show that television increased constituents' knowledge of congressional majorities and the incumbent in their district, but it did so disproportionately among the less educated. For both indices, main and interaction effects are statistically significant in the predicted direction. Figure 1 illustrates these results by graphing the predicted likelihood that a respondent knew which party had a majority in Congress both before and after the election. The figure shows predicted values for three levels of education. The dashed line shows that television hardly affected knowledge at the mean level of education. (The mean education in this period corresponds to finishing high school.) At the 75th education percentile (some nonacademic training after high school, shown by the dotted line), we even see a slight yet insignificant decrease, perhaps because more educated Americans watched television at the expense of reading local newspapers. Among people with low education (25th percentile, respondents with eight years of schooling or less), however, knowledge of congressional majorities increased with the number of TV stations, as indicated by the solid line in Figure 1. The probability of responding correctly to both questions rose from .36 in the absence of local TV stations to .42 in a district with five stations. The first three TV stations in a district increased the probability of knowing the majority party before and after the election by 13%.

The results for knowledge about the incumbent (in the second column of table 1) follow the same pattern. Television significantly increased what less-educated Americans knew about the incumbent in their district. It did not have an equivalent effect on challenger knowledge. The likelihood of hearing about the challenger or recalling the challenger's name was not affected by the presence of television.<sup>17</sup> The

<sup>17</sup>Running the same model for hearing about the challenger produces a main effect for the number of local stations of  $-.007$  (.12) and an interaction effect with education of  $.002$  (.031). The main effect on recall of the challenger's name is  $.004$  (.077), the interaction effect  $-.022$  (.020).

TABLE 1 The Impact of Local Television on Candidate Knowledge

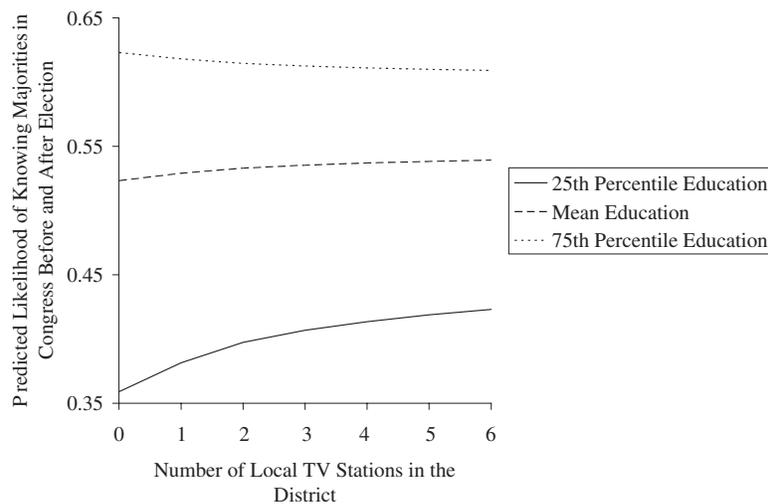
	Knowledge of Congressional Majorities	Knowledge About the Incumbent
Number of TV Stations	.084** (.029)	.084** (.034)
Number of TV Stations × Education	-.024** (.008)	-.034** (.010)
Education	.22** (.02)	.19** (.02)
Campaign Interest	1.01** (.04)	.95** (.05)
Female	-.39** (.03)	-.22** (.03)
African American	-.52** (.05)	-.55** (.06)
Age	.003** (.001)	.005** (.001)
Suburban Area	-.036 (.041)	.011 (.047)
Rural Area	.034 (.039)	.14** (.05)
District Size (in 1,000 sqm)	-.001* (.001)	.001 (.001)
South	.036 (.034)	.17** (.04)
Length of Residence in District	.018 (.024)	.33** (.03)
Incumbent Seniority	-.008* (.004)	-.002 (.005)
Inc. Holds Leadership Position	.32 (.51)	.47 (.47)
Inc. Chairs Standing Committee	-.11 (.08)	-.37** (.10)
1st Cutpoint	.71 (.10)	1.56 (.11)
2nd Cutpoint	1.70 (.10)	2.21 (.12)
3rd Cutpoint		3.33 (.12)
Log likelihood	-6,681.3	-5,495.5
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.13	.12
N	7,158	4,608

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$  (one-tailed).

Note: Cell entries are ordered probit coefficients and standard errors in parentheses. Models also include year dummies and an indicator variable for cases with missing data on the seniority measure. Weights are used when required (NES 1958, 1960). Number of cases is unweighted. Open seat elections are excluded.

Source: NES 1958–60, 64–70.

FIGURE 1 The Effect of Local TV on Knowledge of Congressional Majorities



Note: This graph is based on predicted values from the first model in Table 1.

TABLE 2 The Impact of Local Television on the Voting for the Incumbent

	All	High TV Exposure	Low TV Exposure
Number of TV Stations	.19** (.07)	.29** (.09)	.11 (.10)
Number of TV Stations × Education	−.061** (.018)	−.094** (.026)	−.030 (.025)
Education	.14** (.03)	.19** (.05)	.083* (.05)
Campaign Interest	−.10 (.10)	−.24* (.13)	.09 (.15)
Incumbent Seniority	.014 (.011)	.027* (.015)	.001 (.015)
Challenger Quality	−.22** (.07)	−.36** (.10)	−.078 (.11)
Inc. Holds Leadership Position	−.17 (.92)	−1.85 (1.30)	§
Inc. Chairs Standing Committee	.24 (.22)	−.20 (.30)	.64* (.33)
Number of Candidates > 2	.12 (.08)	.12 (.11)	.15 (.12)
Economic Optimism	.33** (.11)	.29* (.15)	.36* (.17)
Church Attendance	.16* (.09)	.084 (.13)	.24* (.14)
Female	−.02 (.07)	.03 (.09)	−.072 (.095)
African American	.20 (.16)	.20 (.23)	.21 (.23)
Age	−.001 (.002)	−.001 (.003)	−.001 (.004)
Suburban Area	−.40** (.09)	−.47** (.13)	−.32** (.13)
Rural Area	−.20* (.09)	−.27* (.13)	−.13 (.14)
District Size (in 1,000 sqm)	−.007** (.003)	−.011** (.004)	−.002 (.004)
South	.39** (.11)	.40** (.15)	.40** (.16)
Redistricted district	.14 (.11)	.10 (.16)	.18 (.15)
N	4,484	2,414	2,070
Log likelihood	−2,855.5	−1,511.7	−1,326.8
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.038	.051	.034

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$  (one-tailed).

Note: Cell entries are logit coefficient estimates and standard errors in parentheses. Weights are used when required (NES 1958, 1960). Number of cases is unweighted N. The analysis excludes open and uncontested elections as well as respondents who lived in their current districts for less than six months. All models include year dummies and dummies for Democratic and Republican respondents for each year. Models also include indicator variables for cases with missing data on the seniority measure and on the economic optimism variable.

§Excluded because only three respondents in this subsample lived in districts with party leaders and all voted for incumbent.

Source: NES 1958–60, 1964–70.

results support the proposition that the new medium of television presented political information in a form more easily accessible to less-educated people. Incumbents gained visibility because they were in an excellent position to influence the content of local television.

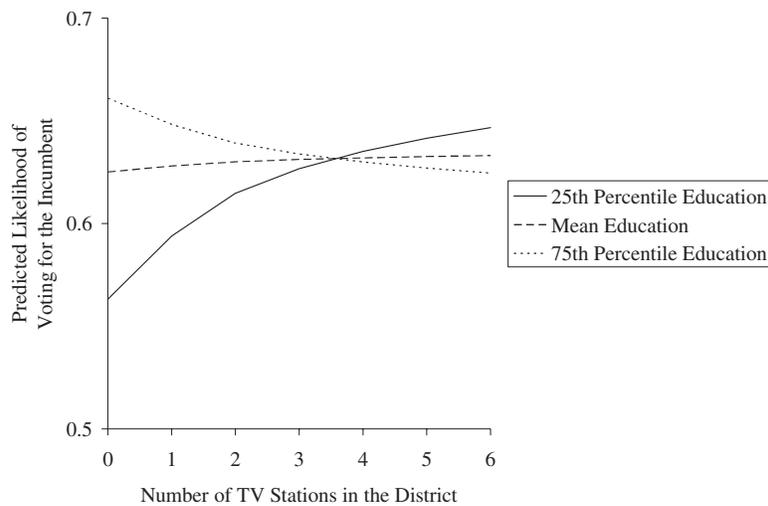
Familiarity with a candidate has a considerable impact on people's voting decision (e.g., Jacobson 2004; Stokes and Miller 1962). Since television raised their familiarity with the incumbent, but not the challenger, less-educated Americans should have become more likely to vote for the incumbent as the number of TV stations in their district grew. To test my second hypothesis, I regress respondents' vote choice on education, the number of TV stations in the district, and the interaction between the two (as well as control variables).<sup>18</sup> As shown in Table 2, the

main effect of television and its interaction with education are both clearly significant. Television increased the probability that less-educated constituents would vote for the incumbent. Figure 2 plots the results. The likelihood that a voter in the 25th percentile of education would cast her vote for the incumbent rose from .56 when her district did not have any local stations to .64 in a district with three stations and .65 in a district with five local stations. The impact of three local TV stations—the median number of stations per district after 1966—thus amounted to an 11% increase in the probability of voting for the incumbent. At the mean level of education, the pro-incumbent effect of TV was essentially zero. Among highly educated voters, local television even decreased the likelihood of voting for the incumbent slightly (but insignificantly).

<sup>18</sup>The analysis excludes respondents who lived in their current district for less than six months. They could not have been affected in the same way as others by the incumbent's presence on the local

news. When these respondents are included, the main effect in Table 2 decreases from .19 to .17, the interaction effect from −.061 to −.057, but both coefficients remain significant at  $p < .01$ .

FIGURE 2 The Effect of Local TV on Voting for the Incumbent



Note: This graph is based on predicted values from the first model in Table 2.

Television's effect was most pronounced among less-educated Americans, many of whom did not follow politics in the pre-broadcast days when doing so required reading a paper or listening to the radio. Yet while local and network news reached more people than any other medium before, it missed more than a few. The effect of television should have been limited to those who watched. If incumbents' ability to insert themselves into the local news generated their increased electoral success, television should have affected the votes of news viewers.<sup>19</sup> NES data allow a rough distinction between respondents who reported watching campaign coverage on television and those who did not.<sup>20</sup> The questions differentiate neither

local and national news, nor presidential and congressional campaigns. For all its limitations, the comparison of the TV effect at high and low levels of exposure in Table 2 shows that the effect is strongest among respondents who watched news reports on a more or less regular basis. Splitting the sample in a similar way by radio or newspaper exposure does not generate any differences, suggesting that exposure to television rather than general political interest facilitated the pro-incumbent effect of local television. It is further evidence that rising incumbent vote margins were not a result of greater campaign activity in general, but of TV messages in particular.

### Aggregate-Level Analysis

Individual-level analysis suggests that television advantaged House incumbents. The analysis of official vote returns in this section verifies the pro-incumbent effect without relying on self-reports and determines the net impact of television in the average congressional district. To estimate the incumbency advantage at the district level, I use the extended Gelman and King (1990) estimator proposed by Cox and Katz (1996). The Gelman-King estimator measures the incumbency advantage by comparing incumbents' vote shares to open-seat elections. The incumbency advantage is the portion of the vote that the incumbent would not have received if he had been a candidate for an open seat (and everything else had been the same). To account for district-level differences

<sup>19</sup>To the extent that advertising was the driving force, television viewers may have been affected regardless of their exposure to news, unless most ads aired during the news, as is the case in contemporary campaigns.

<sup>20</sup>Television news exposure is measured based on two items. The first (included in the NES cumulative file as CF0724) asked respondents: "How about television—did you watch any programs about the campaign on television? [if yes] How many television programs about the campaign would you say you watched—a good many, several, or just one or two?" The second item asked: "Of all these ways of following the campaign, which one would you say you got the most information from—newspapers, radio, television or magazines?" The first item was included in 1960, 1964, and 1968; the second item was included in those years and 1966. About half of the respondents reported watching "a good many" programs and getting most of their news from television. These respondents are included in the high exposure group, while everyone else is classified as low in television exposure. (For 1966, the second item alone distinguishes high and low exposure.)

between candidates, the estimator includes the election outcome in the previous election as a control variable. As this baseline is only accurate for districts that did not change between elections, redistricted districts have to be excluded from the aggregate analysis.

Cox and Katz (1996) have extended the original Gelman-King model by including direct and indirect effects of challenger quality and an indicator of incumbency status in the previous election. The primary purpose of their extension is to take into account incumbents' potential to discourage experienced opponents from challenging them (by inducing them to run in another district or wait for an open seat). This "scare-off" effect is one of the advantages of incumbency, yet the original Gelman-King estimator did not measure it.

The model expresses the Democratic share of the district vote as a function of the Democratic vote share in the previous election, the party defending the seat, and incumbency status in the current and the previous election. As proposed by Cox and Katz, the Democratic candidate's quality advantage is included as a control variable. The model also controls for the effects of the incumbent's seniority, whether or not the incumbent held a party leadership position, whether or not he or she chaired a major standing committee, as well as the size of the district, and whether or not the district is in the South. As explained earlier, these variables might be related to the effect of television, so the model should adjust for their effects. Finally, to estimate the contribution of television to the overall incumbency advantage, I add my measure of the number of TV stations in the district, using the same logarithmic transformation as in the individual-level analysis.<sup>21</sup> The model is estimated by OLS for elections between 1948 and 1970 (excluding the years immediately following a census, 1952 and 1962). Table 3

<sup>21</sup>Formally, the model for each district is:

$$\begin{aligned} DVOTE_t = & \beta^1 DVOTE_{t-1} + \beta^2 PARTY_t + \beta^3 INCUMBENCY_t \\ & + \beta^4 INCUMBENCY_{t-1} + \beta^5 DQUALITY_t + \beta^6 DQUALITY_{t-1} \\ & + \beta^7 SENIORITY_t + \beta^8 SENIORITY_t \times INCUMBENCY_t \\ & + \beta^9 COMMITTEE_t + \beta^{10} COMMITTEE_t \times INCUMBENCY_t \\ & + \beta^{11} LEADER_t + \beta^{12} LEADER_t \times INCUMBENCY_t \\ & + \beta^{13} SOUTH_t + \beta^{14} SOUTH_t \times INCUMBENCY_t + \beta^{15} AREA_t \\ & + \beta^{16} AREA_t \times INCUMBENCY_t + \beta^{17} TV_t + \beta^{18} TV_t \\ & \times INCUMBENCY_t + \epsilon_t \end{aligned}$$

$PARTY_t$  is 1 if a Democrat won the election, -1 if a Republican is the winner;  $INCUMBENCY_t$  and  $INCUMBENCY_{t-1}$  are 1 for Democratic incumbents, -1 for Republican incumbents, and 0 for open races.  $DQUALITY_t$  and  $DQUALITY_{t-1}$  are coded +1 (-1) if only the Democratic (Republican) candidate held elective office before. If both or neither candidate held previous office, the vari-

presents the results for contested elections with an incumbent.<sup>22</sup>

Estimates of the impact of television on the incumbency advantage are statistically significant starting in 1960 and increase between 1960 and 1968. The analysis of aggregate vote returns thus confirms the individual-level analysis. Figure 3 graphs the estimated effect of television obtained by multiplying the coefficient estimate by the mean number of (logged) stations for each year (shown by the dotted line labeled "Direct TV Effect"). Estimates rise from half a percentage point or less throughout most of the 1950s to a high of 2.8 points in 1968. Figure 3 also graphs a measure of the TV-based incumbency advantage that takes into account the indirect effect of television on candidate quality, following Cox and Katz's (1996) approach. If television affected the likelihood that a high-quality candidate challenged the incumbent, the new medium would modify the "scare-off" effect of incumbency. It turns out that television did not significantly change the scare-off effect, except in one year, 1966, which happens to be the year for which most measures of incumbency advantage find the biggest jump. In 1966, the indirect effect of television amounted to about half of the direct effect. When the two components are added (solid line in Figure 3), the TV-based incumbency advantage traces the notorious jump in 1966 somewhat better.<sup>23</sup>

Figure 3 compares the TV-based incumbency advantage to the overall incumbency advantage,

able is 0. The other variables are explained in the text. Coefficients with  $t$  subscripts are estimated for each year, while the effects of the other variables are assumed to be constant across this time period. This model decomposes the incumbency advantage into three elements: the part explained by television ( $\beta^{18}$ ), the part explained by the controls ( $\beta^8, \beta^{10}, \beta^{12}, \beta^{14}, \beta^{16}$ ), and the unexplained rest ( $\beta^3$ ). This specification distinguishes the impact of TV on incumbents ( $\beta^{18}$ ) from the impact of TV on candidates of a particular party ( $\beta^{17}$ ).

<sup>22</sup>Table A1 details how many districts were excluded and why. Time-series analysis of incumbents' vote shares before and after the assignment of the first TV stations in their districts would be a better research design than the cross-sectional analysis presented here. This estimation would be conducted by including fixed effects for districts (Levitt and Wolfram 1997). For the period under study here, a fixed-effects model is difficult to implement because it requires at least two consecutive elections without redistricting, uncontested elections, and open races at the moment when a district receives its first TV station. This combination turned out to be too rare for a meaningful analysis. As a robustness check, I reestimated the model with fixed effects for any district that remained unchanged for at least three elections. The estimated TV effect changed only marginally.

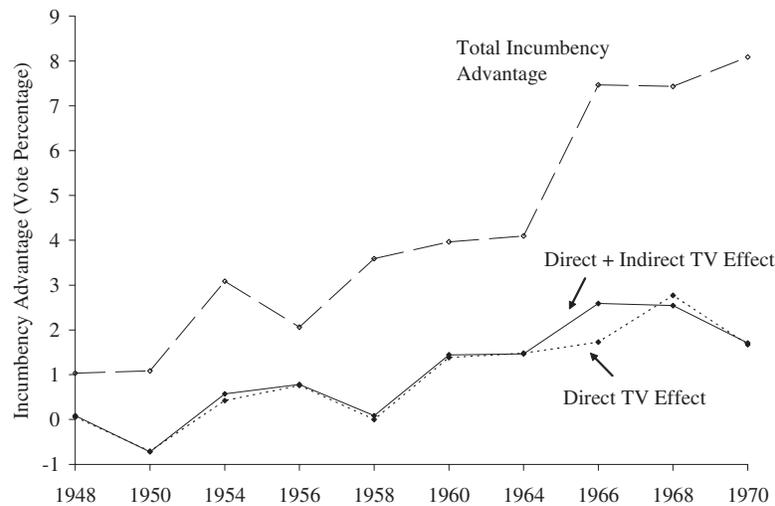
<sup>23</sup>The direct effect of candidate quality on vote margins is not mediated by the number of stations in the district.

TABLE 3 Effect of Local Television on District-Level Incumbency Advantage

	1970	1968	1966	1964	1960	1958	1956	1954	1950	1948
TV <sub>t</sub>	.0040 (.0033)	.0046 (.0042)	.0047 (.0043)	.0052 (.0034)	.0032 (.0033)	.0001 (.0035)	.0056 (.0034)	.0091** (.0036)	-.0005 (.0034)	.0003 (.0039)
TV <sub>t</sub> × INCUMBENCY <sub>t</sub>	.0078* (.0035)	.0131** (.0044)	.0087* (.0044)	.0080* (.0035)	.0076* (.0035)	.00001 (.0038)	.0044 (.0036)	.0026 (.0037)	-.0057 (.0036)	.0006 (.0041)
PARTY <sub>t</sub>	.005 (.013)	.012 (.014)	-.049** (.018)	-.003 (.012)	-.023* (.011)	.014 (.011)	.028* (.013)	.007 (.012)	.021* (.011)	.027** (.010)
INCUMBENCY <sub>t</sub>	.068** (.012)	.038* (.017)	.082** (.020)	.031** (.012)	.039** (.012)	.030** (.012)	.002 (.013)	.035** (.012)	.004 (.011)	-.003 (.011)
INCUMBENCY <sub>t-1</sub>	-.023* (.011)	-.005 (.008)	.007 (.009)	-.010 (.009)	.012* (.007)	.003 (.008)	.007 (.007)	.003 (.008)	.026** (.007)	.009 (.007)
DQUALITY <sub>t</sub>	.037** (.008)	.030** (.010)	.042** (.011)	.019** (.008)	.021** (.007)	.021** (.007)	.017* (.008)	.021** (.008)	.027** (.008)	.038** (.008)
DQUALITY <sub>t-1</sub>	-.002 (.007)	-.011 (.010)	.006 (.010)	.018* (.008)	.010 (.007)	.020** (.008)	-.003 (.007)	.006 (.008)	.015* (.008)	.008 (.008)
Year dummies	-.039** (.008)	-.079** (.009)	-.121** (.010)	-.027** (.007)	-.080** (.008)	-.003 (.008)	-.087** (.008)	-.044** (.007)	-.065** (.007)	—
DVOTE <sub>t-1</sub>		.44** (.01)				SENIORITY <sub>t</sub>			.00068* (.00037)	
AREA <sub>t</sub>		-.000001 (.0001)				SENIORITY <sub>t</sub> × INCUMBENCY <sub>t</sub>			-.00013 (.00044)	
AREA <sub>t</sub> × INCUMBENCY <sub>t</sub>		-.00029** (.00010)				COMMITTEE <sub>t</sub>			.0024 (.0081)	
SOUTH <sub>t</sub>		-.0086* (.0044)				COMMITTEE <sub>t</sub> × INCUMBENCY <sub>t</sub>			.0005 (.0082)	
SOUTH <sub>t</sub> × INCUMBENCY <sub>t</sub>		-.0040 (.0047)				LEADER <sub>t</sub>			.0098 (.0125)	
Constant		.35** (.01)				LEADER <sub>t</sub> × INCUMBENCY <sub>t</sub>			.028* (.012)	

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01 (one-tailed).  
 Note: Cell entries are OLS coefficients and standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the Democratic share of the two-party vote in the district. For cases with missing data on seniority or open races, seniority is set to zero. A dummy variable is included for these cases, but coefficient are not reported.  
 N = 3011, R<sup>2</sup> = .83.

FIGURE 3 The Aggregate Effect of Local TV on the Incumbency Advantage, 1948–1970



Note: This figure plots the size of the TV-based incumbency advantage based on estimates in Table 3 and the mean number of TV stations per year shown in Table A1. As a measure of the overall incumbency advantage, the dashed line shows the average of estimates by Gelman-King (1990), Levitt and Wolfram (1997), and Gelman and Huang (forthcoming).

which is shown by the dashed line and represents the average of three different estimates, the original Gelman-King (1990) estimator and newer estimators developed by Levitt and Wolfram (1997) and Gelman and Huang (forthcoming). The timing and trend of the TV-based advantage correspond to the rise in overall incumbency advantage. For the years 1966 to 1970, the combined direct and indirect effects of television account for one-third of the overall advantage as measured by Levitt and Wolfram (1997) or Gelman and Huang (forthcoming) and one-quarter of the Gelman-King (1990) estimates. Another way of putting the size of the effect in context is to compare it to the effect of challenger quality. The difference between a high-quality and a low-quality challenger is about 3 percentage points in the 1960s, according to Table 3, or about twice the average effect of the first two TV stations in a district.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Campbell, Alford, and Henry 1984; Prinz 1995; Stewart and Reynolds 1990), incumbent benefits from television were higher in districts with poor overlap between media market and district. The TV effect increased significantly with the number of other congressional districts that are covered by the TV stations in the incumbent's district, presumably because challengers lacked newsworthiness to compete for coverage with several other incumbents and because they could not afford to buy airtime in inefficient, and therefore more expensive, markets.

In their analysis of Senate and gubernatorial elections, Ansolabehere, Snowberg, and Snyder (2004) find that incumbents did not do worse in counties that were served by media markets from another state, even though stations in out-of-state markets

## Discussion

Analysis of survey data and aggregate vote returns supports the hypothesis that the growth of television increased the incumbency advantage in U.S. House elections in the 1960s. Access to television increased people's knowledge about the incumbent running for reelection in their district. Challengers, in contrast—who lacked subsidized production facilities, did not have their own talk shows, and could not act as “our reporter on Washington activities” (MacNeil 1968)—remained obscure. As a result, incumbent vote margins increased.

The limited availability of empirical data handicaps this study, especially with regard to local news content. I bring different research designs to bear not only to confirm my findings with different approaches, but also to address some of these handi-

have less of an incentive to cover those incumbents. According to their interpretation, this suggests that incumbents in Senate or gubernatorial elections did not benefit from television. Their analysis rests on the assumptions that incumbents indeed received less coverage from out-state markets (which cannot be verified for the time period in this article) and that campaigning and voting behavior were otherwise the same in areas served by in- and out-state markets. The latter is not obvious. Moreover, the *relative* dominance of the incumbent's over the challenger's television message may be just as high or higher in counties served by out-of-state markets, if incumbents can more easily afford the higher advertising costs, or if they adjust their campaign style to the media environment.

caps. Even though many members of Congress used the TV production facilities and some of them had their own interview shows on stations back home, we do not have systematic measures of news coverage (or advertising) for the early days of television. I do show, however, that only voters who reported exposure to television news became increasingly likely to support their incumbent as the number of TV stations in their district increased. That exposure to politics on television was a prerequisite for the pro-incumbent effect of the new medium is further evidence that rising incumbent vote margins were not a result of greater campaign activity in general, but of television in particular.

Why did television not affect incumbent vote shares before the 1960s? After all, the first television stations started commercial operation in the early 1940s, long before the incumbency advantage began its more precipitous increase. And by 1956, still about 10 years before the mid-60s jump, more than two-thirds of all American households owned a TV set and more than 300 congressional districts had at least one station (Table A1). These numbers, however, mask a slower and more gradual transition to the new medium (Mayer 1993; Sterling and Kittross 1990; Walker and Ferguson 1998). In 1950, 32% of the population had never watched a television program (Mayer 1993, 600–601). None of the TV sets produced before 1952 and less than 20% of those manufactured between 1952 and 1963 could receive UHF channels. In 1960, only 8% of all households had TV sets that were equipped for UHF reception, so the number of stations (which includes UHF stations) exaggerates the degree of coverage in this period (Bower 1973, 4). While almost all Americans had access to a TV set by the end of the 1950s, television news was still in its infancy in the 1950s and continued to increase in length and quality. Television replaced newspapers as people's most favored news source only slowly. According to a 1954 survey, 71% of the population read a newspaper almost every day, but only 39% watched news on television almost daily (Mayer 1993, 595). Roper surveys reveal that television became people's primary news source only in the mid-60s (Roper 1985). Hence, for a mix of technological and use-related reasons, it appears plausible that television's full effect only manifested itself in the 1960s.

It is tempting to speculate about the impact of television on the incumbency advantage beyond the time frame of this study. Does it fit my hypothesis that the incumbency advantage peaked in the 1980s and has declined somewhat since then (Jacobson 2004, 28)? There are several reasons to expect that the symbiosis

between Congress and local stations did not last forever. Since the FCC never revoked a station's license for violating the public affairs requirement, locals became less reluctant to cut news coverage. With inexpensive entertainment programming abundantly available in the form of syndicated shows, local stations became less dependent on cheap public affairs coverage to fill their programming hours. The presentation style of local newscasts changed as the relatively serious formats with considerable focus on political news gave way to *Eyewitness News* and *Action News*, more sensationalist formats that devoted most of their time to car chases, crime, and celebrities. As a result, local news coverage of politics decreased and incumbents were given far fewer opportunities to broadcast their own programs for free.<sup>25</sup>

In the 1980s, cable television started to lower the audience for news. Early cable television brought local television signals to mountainous or rural areas and carried little original programming. The percentage of homes with cable television was less than 1% until 1958, less than 2% until 1964, and even in 1970 small at 7.6%. But beginning in the late 1970s, cable emerged as a competitor to broadcast television. In sum, two conditions that early on helped incumbents take advantage of television changed in the 1970s. First, local stations became less willing to broadcast the incumbent's message. Second, fewer constituents watched the news—and thus the incumbent-friendly reports that still made it on the air.

According to the aggregate analysis, television explains about one-third of the overall incumbency advantage in the late 1960s. For two reasons, this is a conservative estimate. First, the independent variable, the number of TV stations in a district, is only a rough approximation of the availability of television in a district. Some respondents in uncovered areas are inaccurately coded as having access to television (and vice versa), thereby attenuating the estimated effect of television. Second, it is worth pointing out that I measure only the effect of the *availability* of television stations. Undoubtedly, some incumbents made greater (or more successful) use of local television than others. Only future research can show whether candidates' (and voters') *use* of the new medium contributed further to the increased incumbency advantage.

<sup>25</sup>The costs of reporting about Congress decreased in this period. Satellite technology, pool reporters for broadcast chains, and televised sessions of Congress all made it cheaper for local newscasts to include congressional coverage. Yet this coverage still had to compete with other, increasingly "soft" news which also became cheaper to produce.

Table A1 The Growth of Local Television

	Districts with Contested Elections and No Redistricting after Previous Election									
	All districts					Districts with Contested Elections and No Redistricting after Previous Election				
	Number of Districts <sup>1</sup>	Number of Districts with at Least One TV Station	Mean Number of Stations per District	Median Number of Stations per District	Number of Districts	% of which Least One TV Station	Mean Number of Stations per District	% of Republican Districts <sup>2</sup> with TV Station	% of Democratic Districts <sup>2</sup> with TV Station	Bivariate Correlation Between Number of Stations and Inc. Vote Share
1946	428	60	.36	0	347	17	.45	9	28	-.06
1948	429	113	.90	0	330	29	1.00	28	34	-.02
1950	429	155	1.26	0	341	42	1.53	26	55	-.01
1952	427	158	1.26	0	183	33	.91	27	51	-.14
1954	428	287	1.86	1	342	70	2.10	68	71	.06
1956	428	305	2.07	2	353	75	2.31	71	81	.07
1958	431	315	2.17	2	332	74	2.38	70	82	.14
1960	430	322	2.25	2	350	75	2.43	70	78	.16
1962	417	295	2.22	2	171	68	1.86	60	73	.11
1964	427	307	2.35	2	334	71	2.48	69	73	.17
1966	430	325	2.67	3	208	76	3.19	76	76	.30
1968	432	340	3.05	3	215	74	2.57	72	77	.20
1970	432	346	3.17	3	322	78	3.14	74	79	.19

<sup>1</sup>At-large districts are excluded unless they are the state's only district.

<sup>2</sup>Republican (Democratic) districts refer to districts with a Republican (Democratic) incumbent.

The fact that television explains a significant portion of the increased incumbency advantage does not necessarily clash with existing accounts of what triggered the rise. According to the constituency service explanation (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1984; Fiorina 1977a, 1981), once elected, members of Congress institutionalized more and more resources and used them to provide additional services to their constituents. This, in turn, made it sensible to vote for the incumbent even if he or she represented a different party. Among the perks of office is the opportunity to reach constituents through the media. Incumbents “may write a short column or tape a short Washington Report for the local media” (Fiorina 1977b, 19). That *expected* casework is at least as strong a predictor of voting for the incumbent as actual past casework (Fiorina 1981) suggests that media reports of constituency service may be just as important as constituency service itself. Indeed, the extent to which constituents expect their representative to be helpful in the future depends on how well the representative’s name is recognized and how often he is seen in the media (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1984). The constituency service hypothesis, then, has always been an argument for media as an important factor in explaining the increased incumbency advantage. Offered the opportunity to send their reports from Washington to their home districts and have them broadcast for free, incumbents would be foolish not to emphasize what they have done for their district and advertise their plans to bring home more goodies in the future.

A second explanation of the increased incumbency advantage in the 60s focuses on the decline in party identification and party-line voting (Cover 1977; Ferejohn 1977; Nelson 1978). As partisan cues became less important for the voter, incumbency cues took their place. But, as Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina note, this explanation remains unsatisfying unless we know what triggered the decreasing relevance of party cues:

How does the dynamic [of mutually reinforcing declining importance of parties and increasing incumbency advantage] begin in the first place? Perhaps through some exogenous event(s) as with the aforementioned suggestions of bad performance or unpopular issues stands, or even *as a result of more-or-less nonpolitical factors such as a changing media environment, social or technological change, or whatnot.* (1984, 123; my italics)

The present analysis has shown that a specific change in the media environment, the growth of television, did indeed increase the likelihood that less educated constituents would cast their vote for the incumbent. While television explains only a portion of

the overall incumbency advantage, it represents a truly exogenous factor. Yet, it is misleading to characterize the media environment as a “more-or-less nonpolitical” factor. The availability of media and the standards and practices that guide media output condition the way our political system works. Starting in the 1950s, a change in the media environment linked two institutions, Congress and the media, in a symbiotic relationship that helped local television stations comply with the FCC public affairs requirement and members of Congress spread their message more widely. By bringing representatives into people’s living rooms, an exogenous technological advance increased the advantage of incumbency, thereby shifting the political balance between incumbent and challenger in the incumbent’s favor.

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