

Are Americans Stuck in Uncompetitive Enclaves? An Appraisal of U.S. Electoral Competition

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ABSTRACT

Most elections in the United States are not close, which has raised concerns among social scientists and reform advocates about the vibrancy of American democracy. In this paper, we demonstrate that while individual elections are often uncompetitive, *hierarchical*, *temporal*, and *geographic* variation in the locus of competition results in most of the country regularly experiencing close elections. In the four-cycle period between 2006 and 2012, 89% of Americans were in a highly competitive jurisdiction for at least one office. Since 1914, about half the states have never gone more than four election cycles without a close statewide contest. More Americans witness competition than citizens of Canada or the UK, other nations with SMSP-based systems. The dispersed competition we find also results in nearly all Americans being represented by both political parties for different offices.

Keywords: Elections; competition; political geography

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Genuine competition is central to the idea of democracy. Without political leaders competing for votes in an election, a democratic system may be democratic in name only (Mann and Cain, 2005; Schumpeter, 1947). In the United States, however, the diagnostics of competitiveness employed by scholars, activists, and journalists provide unflattering signs. At all levels of electoral contestation, analysts point out how few Americans actually experience a closely fought election. The majority of citizens thus appear to be bystanders of democracy rather than full-fledged participants.

Reflecting on this lack of competition, a generation of scholars has sought to understand both the causes and consequences of uncompetitive elections. For instance, the robust literature on the incumbency advantage is motivated by evidence of vanishing marginal elections (Mayhew, 1974).¹ A lack of competition may encourage politicians to be less responsive (Ansolabehere *et al.*, 1992) and make voters less inclined to engage in politics (Evans *et al.*, 2014; Franklin, 2004). A wide-ranging agenda for election reform is also motivated by the apparent lack of electoral competition. Electoral College reform, redistricting reform, campaign finance reform, term limits, and ballot access to third parties are among the many fixes advocated to solve the problem of uncompetitive elections (Basham and Polhill, 2005; Mann and Cain, 2005; Persily, 2006). Each of these would constitute a fundamental change in the American electoral process, with implications for campaign strategy, voter learning, and representation (Lipsitz, 2011).

But how uncompetitive are elections in the United States? In this paper we take a new perspective on this question, adding an important amendment to the conventional view at the root of a weighty research agenda. Namely, we demonstrate that while in any one election cycle and in any one type of an election the majority of voters may not experience a closely fought contest, the unusual frequency and variety of elections in the United States generate a system in which nearly all Americans regularly experience competitive elections. We also identify a key consequence of such competition: nearly all Americans are represented by officeholders of both political parties.

The fact that a large majority of Americans see close elections should shift our understanding of what ails contemporary American politics. Of course, we do not dispute that there can be important consequences to a lack of competition in any one election or set of elections. We do, however, dispute the dominant view that most voters are disenfranchised from real electoral contestation. Rhetoric calling the supposed lack of competition in American politics “scandalous” or characteristic of a “dubious democracy” does not square with the evidence of robust electoral competition we present here.² While

¹For recent examples, see Fowler and Hall (2016) and Hainmueller *et al.* (2015).

²See Adam Nagourney, “States See Growing Campaign to Change Redistricting Laws,” *New York Times*, 7 Feb 2005, for quote from Professor Samuel Issacharoff calling the lack

most elections in the United States are not close contests, most Americans experience close elections.

The Engines of Competition

Consider the imaginary, but instructive, scenario in which nearly every citizen is a partisan, always votes, and invariably selects the party line. Some voters live in places where all citizens share a party affiliation while others live in places where partisans are mixed together. In this scenario, the same electoral geographies would always provide close contests, in every year and for every office. These areas would be “universal battlegrounds” while the rest of the country would be a competitive drought-land. In such a scenario, all elections are dependent on each other; they could be perfectly predicted by examining a single election in a single year.

This unrealistic scenario might not be too far from the caricature in the heads of many political observers, who see high rates of partisan fidelity, well-sorted political parties, and lament how many states and districts are uncompetitive. Researchers are not immune to this type of thinking: The widespread use of measures of competitiveness based on presidential election results (e.g. Cook Political Report’s Partisan Voting Index), or designations of “battleground” and “blackout” states (Grofman and Feld, 2005; Johnson, 2005), and most methods of constructing a “normal vote” assume a strong correlation in patterns of behavior across electoral levels and election cycle to election cycle.

But this caricature of American elections is incorrect. The key to understanding the distribution of competition in American elections is the extent to which particular races at particular points in time are independent of other races and independent of other points in time. In a system characterized by frequent and multitudinous elections for different levels of office, there need not be a high year-to-year or office-to-office correlation of competitiveness. Specifically, *geographical*, *temporal*, and *hierarchical* variation in the political context in which an election takes place makes it possible for nearly all Americans to regularly experience competitive contests.

Geographic variation in competition. The median voter theorem gives us reason to believe that competition will be dispersed geographically. Republicans field candidates in Massachusetts and Democrats do the same in Alabama. Such contestation requires even the most partisan of office-seekers to appeal to the middle of the electorate (Cox, 1997; Downs, 1957; Griffin, 2006). By emphasizing and prioritizing issues strategically, and doing so at the right

of competition scandalous. Also see Fairvote.org’s report on Congressional elections titled “Dubious Democracy” (http://www.fairvote.org/dubious_democracy).

time, otherwise partisan politicians appeal to the center when necessary and generate close contests across a range of politically diverse geographies.

Temporal variation in competition. Even over a short span of time, some locations can vacillate in their level of competition quite dramatically. One way this happens is through the phenomenon of nationalization, where the national focus of politics can serve to expand the number of competitive elections year-to-year and produce temporal variation in the locus of competition. Scholarship on nationalization, polarization, and partisan coattails has shown that the vote shares of legislative candidates are affected by the popularity of the incumbent executive's party (Abramowitz and Webster, 2015; Erikson, 2010; Folke and Snyder, 2012; Hopkins, 2018; Jacobson, 2011; Mattei and Glasgow, 2005; McCarty *et al.*, 2006). As the popularity of the party in power at the national level rises and falls year-to-year, biennial elections may serve to take the temperature of the electorate at high points and low points for the incumbent party. In different years, Republicans and Democrats in the electorate are enthusiastic about their side and turn out to vote in higher or lower numbers. All races on the ballot might be affected by this temporally-fluctuating, nationally-focused enthusiasm. When the President's party is popular, therefore, a different part of the country sees close races compared to a year in which the President's party is unpopular. An expanded number of competitive elections is an unappreciated externality from the nationalization tendency in American politics.

Hierarchical variation in competition. Americans also show a willingness to vote for different parties in different offices, generating hierarchical variation in the locus of competition. While voters may abstain from down-ballot races, competition across levels of government is less highly correlated than one might expect from an electorate that is loyal to its party and faced with candidates who keep to the party line. In the most striking example, Presidents, Governors, and Senators face the same state electorates, even at the same time, but rarely all receive the same vote share. Concepts like split-ticket voting, midterm loss, and divided government depend in part on variation in citizens' partisan vote choice based on the level of office (Atkeson and Partin, 1995; Burden and Kimball, 1998; Campbell and Miller, 1957; Fiorina, 1992; Jacobson, 1990; Kritzer and Eubank, 1979; Tompkins, 1988). In some instances, this is due to election-specific contextual factors: a race can feature an incumbent or not, a scandal-ridden candidate or not, a critical roll-call vote or not, an exogenous shock or not. Candidates also have different issues of emphasis, generally related to their differing roles depending on specific office they seek. The result: hierarchical variation in the locus of competition.

These three sources of variation in competition can be passed over in research that studies single election years or contests. Broadening the view

to multiple election cycles and levels of office, the contours of American political competition come into clearer view. And that view shows a surprising variation in the locus of competition. Importantly, this variation results from institutional design laid out in the Constitution: frequent elections (which permits temporal variation) for many different offices (which permits hierarchical variation) in a federal system (which permits geographic variation).

Why Experiencing Competitive Elections Matters

Our empirical investigation is focused on measuring the rate at which voters see competitive elections, as well as benchmarks for evaluating the observed rate and subsidiary questions about the consequences of competition for party control. Before beginning this endeavor, however, it is worthwhile to reflect on why we ought to care about the rate at which voters experience competitive elections rather than the more common exercise of evaluating the rate at which elections for particular offices are competitive.

From the perspective of an individual, experience with competition produces several normatively desirable outcomes. First, competition triggers attention from politicians, parties, and from the news media. This in turn likely results in voters becoming more informed (Gimpel *et al.*, 2007) and their communities receiving government benefits (Kriner and Reeves, 2015). As we discuss at the end of our essay, the competition a voter sees is also closely linked to the voter being represented by both parties for different offices, which in turn affects how voters interact with government (Broockman and Ryan, 2015). Furthermore, a voter's experience with competition is a common proxy for evaluating the quality of representation, as in "wasted vote" metrics featured in current litigation over partisan gerrymandering (Stephanopolous and McGhee, 2015).

Our assessment focuses on whether a voter sees at least one competitive election over a period of time, combining the temporal, geographic, and hierarchical sources of competition. What value is there in such a metric compared to a more standard estimate of the "normal vote" in a jurisdiction? Can voters really be said to experience meaningful competition because they had one or two elections in a period of four years that were closely fought?

To answer this question, an example is helpful. Consider the 2017 U.S. Senate special election in Alabama, in which the Democrat Doug Jones won a very close race in a solidly Republican state. This was not a normal election; the Republican candidate was unusually flawed. If this Senate race was not the typical experience in Alabama, what value is there in counting a fluke instance like this as something generally reflective of a voter's experience?

Our answer is that elections that appear fluke-like in the moment are not flukes after all once we broaden our view beyond a single year. Consider

that back in 2008, which was a good year for Democrats at a national level, conservative white Democrats Bobby Bright and Parker Griffith won close elections in two of Alabama's six majority-white congressional districts. In 2010, which was a good year for Republicans, both of these Representatives were defeated, one of them in another very close contest. Furthermore, in 2010 23% of Alabamians saw a close state senate race and 14% saw a close state house race, and the locations of these close races mostly did not generally overlap. Thus while Alabama did not have a competitive statewide race between 2006 and 2012, nearly two-thirds of the population witnessed a highly competitive election in this time period that we focus on below.

With that context, Doug Jones's surprise victory for U.S. Senate in 2017 seems less of a fluke than it was portrayed. Thinking of Alabama as a solidly Republican state where voters rarely see competition, except in extreme circumstances like the 2017 special election, simply does not reflect the experience of voters in the state. The same is true in "solidly" Democratic states like Massachusetts, which in the same time frame saw a competitive gubernatorial race between Deval Patrick and Charlie Baker, a competitive House race in the tenth district, and most consequentially the close win and then loss of Republican Senator Scott Brown.

Nearly every state has stories like this. And this is why our measure of competition is necessary. The average statewide election in Massachusetts or Alabama is not close. At the same time, states like these can have regular experience with competitive elections that profoundly affects the experience of voters and the strategies of politicians.

We should also emphasize that competition need not only be cast in positive light. Newer democracies have chosen not to adopt the U.S. electoral system in part because of dislike of "short-termism," the inability to focus on solving important problems because the next election is just around the corner.³ The hierarchical, geographic, and temporal variation induced by frequent elections may also exacerbate outcomes such as unstable majorities (Fiorina, 2017), voter fatigue, and a diminished focus on policy proposals by candidates.

The relationship between temporal shifts in competition and nationalization trends forms a particularly salient example of potential tradeoffs to increased competition (Hopkins, 2018). On the one hand, it may be normatively problematic when nationwide tides affect local offices that have only a tangential relationship to national politics. On the other hand, offices like state legislator do affect national politics through their role in redistricting and partnerships with the federal government on issues like health care and immigration. Thus, while we hope to provide a corrective to the conventional measurement strategy used in assessing competition and to the conventional

³Yascha Mounk, "Why the U.S. is the only country in the world to have elections so often," *Quartz*, November 4, 2014.

wisdom of the lack of competition, our view is not necessarily that competition is universally salutary for a democracy.

Data and Estimation Strategy

Our first analysis covers elections between 2006 and 2012. For this time period, we study six kinds of elections: state-level Presidential, Senatorial, Gubernatorial, Congressional, state legislative upper chamber, and state legislative lower chamber. We conduct a second analysis on the 50 biennial elections between 1914 and 2012, focusing on statewide races.

Data for federal and gubernatorial elections are drawn from the Congressional Quarterly (CQ) Voting and Elections Collection. CQ provides candidate-specific election results, along with counts of total ballots cast in each election. State legislative election information was extracted from candidate-level data provided by Klarner *et al.* (2013) and Klarner (2013). We do not include races for lower statewide offices, partisan primary elections, or municipal races for the sake of simplicity and due to data availability. But, adding additional races would only show how much *more* of the population sees competition in elections; thus one may see our study as a conservative description of electoral contestation in the United States.

Competitiveness is conceptualized as the margin of victory for the winning candidate, which is calculated as the number of votes separating the first and second place candidates for an office divided by the total number of votes cast for the same office.⁴ Such a measure of electoral closeness is standard in the literature (Fraga and Hersh, 2010; Geys, 2006), and also allows us to account for situations where competitive candidates are not from either of the two major parties. For presidential elections, we use state-level information on the popular vote as allocated to candidates by party.

We combine measures of electoral competition with block-level data from the 2010 U.S. Census. We obtain counts of the enumerated voting-age population residing within each relevant electoral jurisdiction.⁵ Block-level data also allow us to account for hierarchical variation and redistricting by analyzing the intersection of jurisdictions; see Appendix Figure A1 and the associated text for further explanation.

We identify close races based on the vote margin between the first and second place finishers. But what counts as a close contest? We turn to the Cook Political Report, which regularly evaluates races on a seven-point scale (Solid Democratic, Likely Democratic, Lean Democratic, Toss-up, Lean

⁴In state legislative elections with multimember districts, the margin of victory is calculated as the number of votes separating the “last winner” versus the “first loser,” divided by the total number of votes cast in the multimember district.

⁵Data are available at <https://www.census.gov/rdo/data/>.

Republican, Likely Republican, Solid Republican). Cook ratings are not available for all races or for all years, but they are a useful way to gauge the relationship between vote share and predicted closeness. In Appendix Figure A2, we show that the median “toss-up” race ended up with a vote margin of about 5 percentage points (e.g. a 52.5%–47.5% spread). The median “leaning” race ended up with a vote margin of 10 percentage points (a 55%–45% race). Accordingly, we will utilize a more stringent 5 point margin and a less stringent 10 point margin as cutoffs for defining close races. Of course, when looking at tens of thousands of races, no estimate of closeness is perfect. But given the Cook data, 5 and 10 point margins are useful approximations.

The Locus of Competition

Our empirical analysis begins with the four-cycle period from 2006 to 2012. We examine the extent of competition across races and time in Figure 1. Note that for the U.S. Senate and state offices, not every voter was eligible to participate in each specific year, and thus the denominator in this graph changes based on voters who did have the opportunity to vote in an election for the specific office in that year. For instance, since all U.S. House races are up for election every two years, the denominator for these races in the chart is always measured as 234 million. On the other hand, in 2008, only a few states held gubernatorial elections. Thus, just over 40% of the 28.7 million voters who could have cast ballots for their governor saw a close contest.

First, we confirm the conventional narrative: in any one election year, for any particular office, the vast majority of voters do not see a close contest. In none of the four Congressional cycles did 20% of adults see a ≤ 10 point margin in a U.S. House race. The same is true for state legislative races.⁶ State-level races show larger proportions of the electorate seeing a competitive race. But still, most voters are expected to be “bystanders” in any single election.

However, after adding temporal variation to the geographic variation more commonly examined, we get a different story. For each office in Figure 1, the “Any” heading indicates the percent of the population in at least one competitive election over the four-election period. Here we see that over 35% of adults saw a ≤ 10 point margin in their U.S. House race, with more than half seeing competitive Senate and Gubernatorial races over the period. The bars labeled “Any Race” at the bottom of the chart combine hierarchical and geographic variation, collapsing across offices to examine how many voters saw a competitive election at any level in each year. In each of the four years, more than half of the eligible population saw a close (e.g. 55%–45%) race on

⁶It is worth noting that somewhat contrary to the expectations of Gerring *et al.* (2015), though state senate districts are larger than state house districts, more voters witness close races at the state house level than the state senate level.

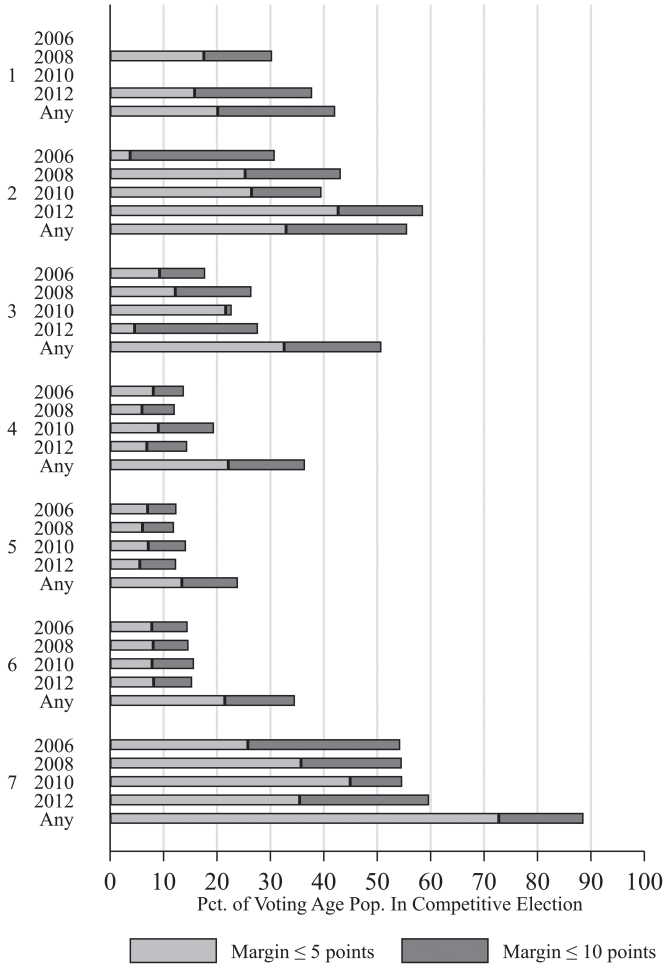


Figure 1: Close election by year and office.

Note: Percentages are based on voters eligible for a particular race in a particular year. Observation counts range from 28.7 million for those in states with gubernatorial elections in 2008 and 2012 to 234 million in U.S. House elections in each year.

the ballot. About a third of the population saw a race with a razor thin (≤ 5 point) margin.

Finally, the bar at the very bottom of Figure 1 combines geographic, temporal, and hierarchical variation, calculating the percentage of the population that saw at least one competitive election in any office in any year under study. Seventy-three percent of the population saw a race with less than a

five-point margin of victory and 89% saw a race with less than a ten-point margin of victory.⁷ Even excluding state house and senate races, and focusing just on elections for President, Governor, Senator, and U.S. House, 83% of the population saw an election with less than a ten-point margin in this time frame. Again, this analysis is based only on elections for just a few offices over the course of just six years. It does not take into account voters who saw competitive primaries or municipal races. While most elections are not competitive, the vast majority of Americans experience close elections at least once over a relatively short time span.⁸

In Figure 2, we visualize locations that have been subject to electoral competition. Dark gray denotes places that had at least one race with less

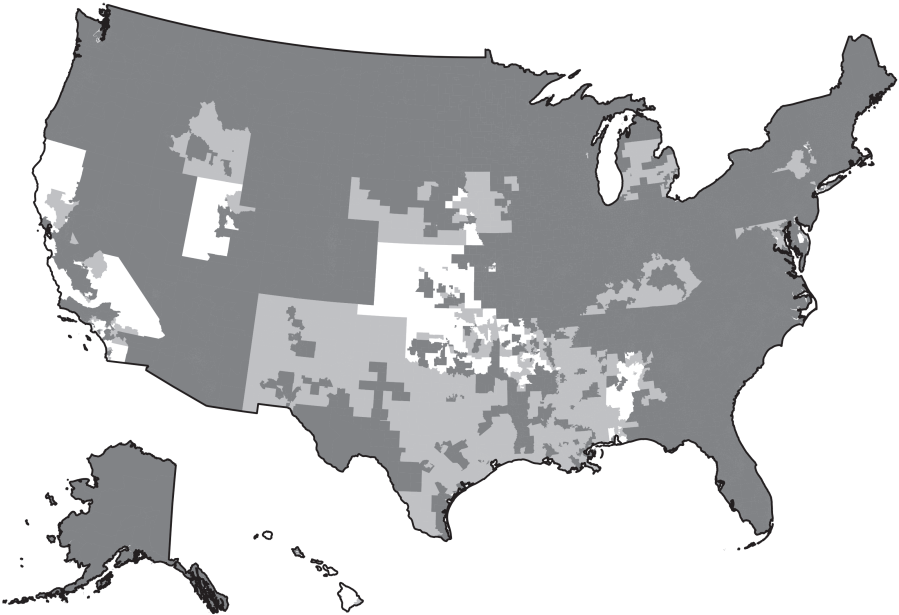


Figure 2: Geography of close contests.

Note: Dark gray represents locations that witnessed at least one race with less than a 5 point margin of victory. Light gray represents areas with less than a 10 point margin of victory. White represents an area with no competitive contest between 2006 and 2012.

⁷In Appendix Figure A3, we examine the sensitivity of this result to the 5 or 10 percentage point cutoff by varying the cutoff from a margin of 1 percentage point to a margin of 30 percentage points.

⁸In Appendix Figure A4 we calculate the percent of all elections a voter saw between 2006 and 2012 that qualified as competitive. About one out of every five elections is competitive for the average American adult, and 25% of adults have competitive elections at least 30% of the time.

than a five-point margin, light gray denotes places that had at least one race with a 5 to 10 point margin, and white denotes places that had no races with a close margin. As a reminder, an area lacking competition could have legislative races that are solidly for one party and state races that are solidly for the other, or could have all races solidly for the same party. There are different normative implications of each of these scenarios, which we revisit below, but either way the result would be that Figure 2 either accurately reflects or *understates* the geographic dispersion of two-party competition.

Two major, distinct regions of the country are competitive drought-lands. Most prominently displayed on the map, the center of the country, including much of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas, hosted neither competitive statewide races nor legislative races between 2006 and 2012. Second, much of California, including some populated coastal areas, also saw no competition at the state level or for legislative offices. However, these regions are outliers. The most important feature of the map is how much of the country saw close competition in this short amount of time. This includes all of New England, the Midwest, and the Pacific Northwest, and nearly all of the Deep South and Mountain West. That is, it includes almost the whole country, urban and rural, racially diverse and racially homogenous, liberal and conservative.

How unusual is the time period between 2006 and 2012? To answer this question, we broaden the scope to look at elections over a nearly hundred-year period lasting from 1914 to 2012. In this analysis, we set aside the complexities associated with shifting legislative boundaries and changes in population. Our unit of analysis is the state, and we look only at statewide races for President, Governor, and Senator.

We count the number of consecutive election cycles in which a state saw no statewide race with a narrow margin of victory. We call this an uncompetitive run. Figure 3 shows a histogram representing each state's longest run during this 50-cycle period. Odd-year gubernatorial elections are counted in the previous even-numbered year to simplify the presentation. Most states are clustered in the range of 2 to 6 cycles. In fact, since 1914, about half the states have never once gone more than four election cycles without a 55%–45% or closer contest.

Figure 3 also has a long tail, indicating the few states that went for over a decade without a close race. We identify these states to show that they are all concentrated in the South. As is well known, through most of the twentieth century, the white-dominated Southern electorate was solidly Democratic. Only the Southern states went through a lengthy competitive drought. The rest of the states have never had such a run of uncompetitive elections. And interestingly, since the time of post-Voting Rights Act black enfranchisement, the South has not been distinctively uncompetitive for statewide offices. Of the Southern states, only Alabama and Arkansas have had a run lasting more than four cycles since the 1970s.

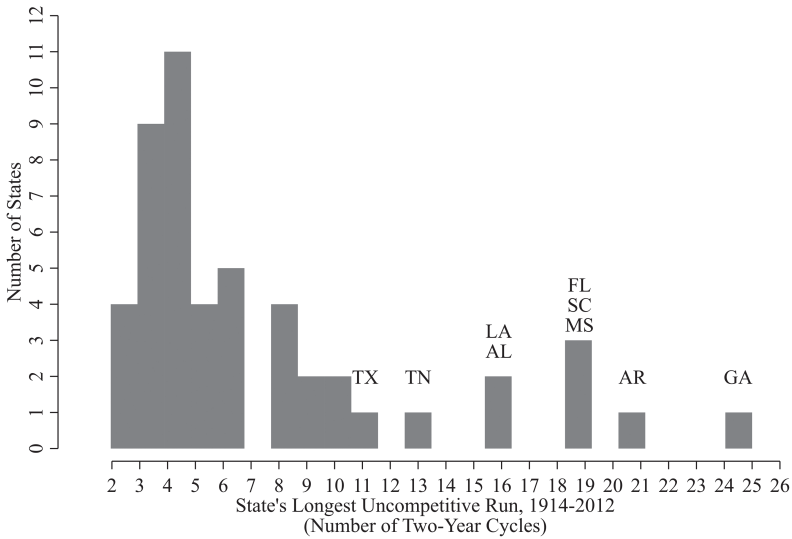


Figure 3: Uncompetitive statewide runs (10 point margin), 1914–2012.

In this nearly 100-year analysis, regular instances of competition are the norm. Even setting aside the many opportunities for competition in legislative elections, lower-tiered state races, primaries, and municipal contests, most states do not go very long without a close state contest. We see that the period of 2006–2012 is not unusual. For most states, like for most people, competitive elections occur frequently, just not always for the same office or at the same moment in time.

Competitive Compared to What?

The preceding analyses suggest that nearly all Americans experience at least one competitive election over a few election cycles. But to this point it remains unclear whether the level of competition we witness is high or low. The literature on electoral competition offers no obvious benchmark for evaluating the amount of competition in isolation. Thus, in this section, we make three comparisons in an effort to understand whether the current level of competitiveness in American elections is relatively high or low.

Competitive Compared to Other Nations. Our first approach to gauge the current level of competition in American elections is by looking at other countries. Consider two other nations that elect their national governments

through single-member districts with a plurality threshold for victory: Canada and the United Kingdom.

Such an analysis recalls a key point discussed at the beginning of this article: frequent elections for many offices likely gives Americans' more experience with competition than alternative institutional designs. In the United States, voters cast separate votes for President, Senate, and the House of Representatives to determine power in the federal government. In practice, the Westminster system's equivalent is a single vote for the lower house of parliament. Thus, to compare the level of competition across these systems from the perspective of the voter, elections to *each* federal office should be included.

Between 2006 and 2012, Americans voted in four elections that determined the entirety of their legislative and executive representation at the national level. We compare the amount of competition witnessed by Americans during that six-year time period with the competition witnessed in two UK general elections (2010 and 2015) and three Canadian general elections (2006, 2008, and 2011).⁹ Leveraging the Constituency-Level Elections Archive (CLEA, Kollman *et al.*, 2016), we generate Table 1.¹⁰

Table 1 shows that in roughly equivalent time frames, 74% of Americans saw a close federal election in their jurisdiction compared to 35% of Britons and 55% of Canadians. Like in the United States, most Britons and Canadians do not live in competitive electoral jurisdictions. Unlike in the U.S., citizens of these countries only vote in federal elections for their parliamentary representative

Table 1: Voters' experiencing competition in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada.

Country	5% Threshold	10% Threshold	Elections
United States	58.8%	74.4%	2006, 2008, 2010, 2012
United Kingdom	17.9	35.4	2010, 2015
Canada	36.8	54.9	2006, 2008, 2011

Note: Includes national or federal elections only.

⁹Three factors drive our decision to examine these UK and Canadian elections while excluding others. First, the five-year time period is as close as possible to the six-year time period we use for the United States. Second, voters across the three countries have the opportunity to elect each "seat" at least twice, accounting for the six-year term of Senators in the United States. Third, electoral jurisdictions were modified after the 2005 UK election and after the 2011 Canadian election, such that the elections we examine allow us to observe competition over time for the *same* citizens.

¹⁰The CLEA does not provide estimates of the number of eligible adults residing in each Canadian electoral jurisdiction (or "Riding"). We merge the CLEA information with the 2011 Canadian National Household Survey (NHS) for the analysis. For the UK, the number of eligible voters in each UK constituency from the 2016 CLEA are used.

and do so less frequently than in the United States. As a result, if the appropriate benchmark is cross-national comparison, the observed level of competition in the United States appears to be high.

Competitive compared to earlier historical eras. A second tack at the same question utilizes the state-level historical data. Here, we benchmark the current experience with competition to earlier eras. To do this, we organize the data into four-cycle periods between 1914 and 2012. Period 1 runs from 1914 to 1920. Period 2 runs from 1916 to 1922, and so forth. For each period, we calculate the percentage of states that saw at least one competitive statewide election, defining competitive with the same 5 point and 10 point thresholds as before.

Figure 4 shows a lengthy period between the late 1950s and early 1990s when competition was consistently high. In that era, about 95% of states saw at least one statewide contest with less than 10 point margin of victory and 80% of states saw at least one with less than a 5 point margin of victory. In the first 40 years in the figure, more states went four cycles without a competitive Senate, Gubernatorial, or Presidential contest. Since 2000, the percentage of states seeing competition looks more like this earlier era than the 1960s–1990s.

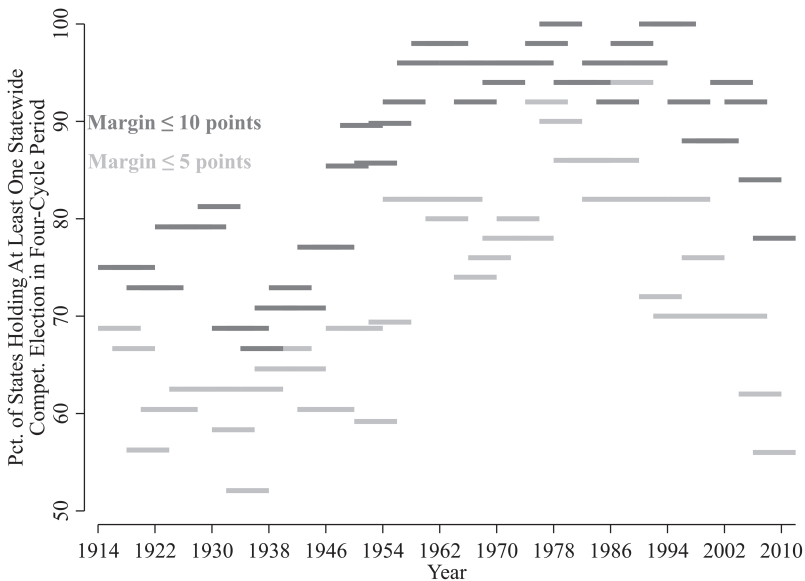


Figure 4: When were elections more competitive?

On the one hand, the historical benchmark reveals a recent decrease in states' experiencing competition. On the other hand, over a century-long view, recent elections are not distinctly uncompetitive. Importantly, in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, when scholars were finding fewer close contests and higher incumbent vote shares than in years prior, Figure 4 shows that nearly all voters were actually seeing a close statewide race. An increase in the incumbency advantage did not necessarily translate into a competitive drought from the perspective of voters.

Competitive compared to literature-derived expectations. Our final approach for benchmarking competition is to turn to the scholarly literature on individual-level American electoral behavior. This literature as a whole suggests far less competition than we describe above. That is, if very few partisans defect or split their tickets (Jacobson, 2014), or if voters are geographically clustered (Nall, 2015), or if most incumbents win individual races and often do so with wide margins (Ansolabehere and Snyder Jr., 2002), then one might reasonably presume that most voters live in enclaves in which they will almost never see close contests. From this perspective, we think the fact that most voters regularly see at least some competition is a corrective to the conventional expectation.

Returning to our normative discussion, we may also reflect on whether the observed level of competition is "enough" or "not enough." The precise answer to this question is also not firmly established in previous work. Too much competition or too little competition could signal systemic problems. If voters see competition in all or almost all races, this suggests that politicians who perform well in office are not rewarded for their competence, such that too much competition may be a bad sign. On the other hand, if voters never see competition, this suggests that the electoral system is incapable of voting out of office inferior politicians that inevitably arise within specific locations. Uncompetitive districts may also allow legislators to dodge their constituents' preferences without fear of electoral reprisal (Griffin, 2006; Mayhew, 1974). If the avoidance of extremes in rates of competition is normatively desirable, the data we present are consistent with this principle.

Competition and Representation

Perhaps the most important reason why electoral closeness matters is that it means that incumbent candidates and parties are not assured re-election. But in theory, electorates can see closeness without mixed partisan control if close elections always end up in favor of a single party. We thus extend the analysis to account for variation in partisan control of elected offices. Here,

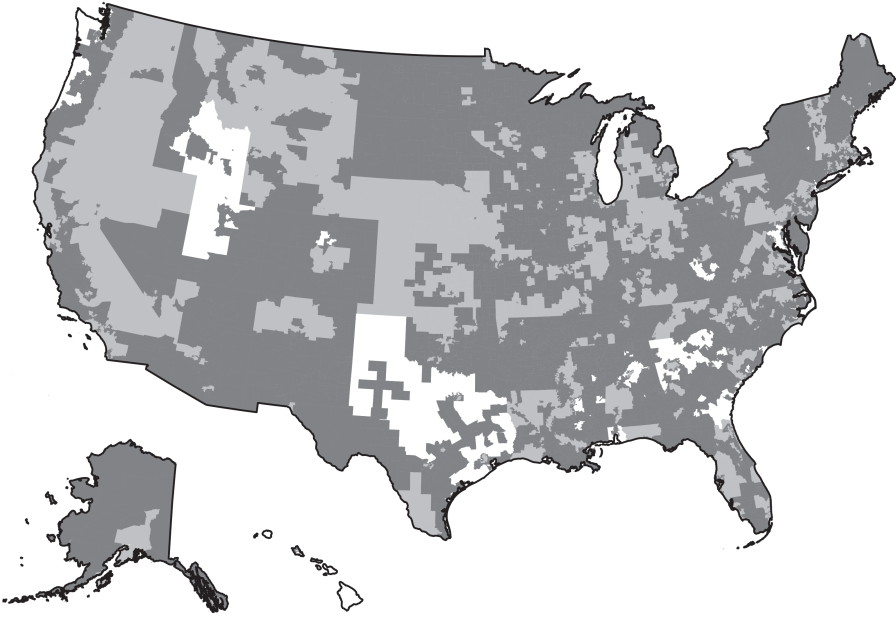


Figure 5: Geography of mixed party control.

Note: Dark gray areas were represented by at least one Democrat and at least one Republican during the 2006–2012 time period in the U.S. House, state senate, and/or state house. Light gray areas were represented by only one party in the U.S. House, State Senate, and State House, but were represented by the other party in the Senate or Governorship. White areas saw no mixed party control.

our question is the extent to which the U.S. population lives in areas where one party controls all levels of office over the period from 2006 to 2012.

Do we see large regions of the country with single-party dominance at every level of office? No. Dark gray areas of Figure 5 indicate places where mixed party control was observed at the state legislative or congressional district level during the time period. In these areas, adults were represented by at least one Democratic legislator and one Republican legislator for some period of time between 2006 and 2012. In light gray areas, voters were represented by a single party in the U.S. House and upper and lower state house chambers, but had a Senator or a Governor of the opposite party.

Drawing on 2010 Census population counts for these areas, 89% of Americans lived in geographic units represented by both parties between 2006 and 2012, concurring with the 89% of Americans who witnessed a close election over the same time period. Only 5.4% of Americans are in jurisdictions where every office from state representative to Governor and Senator was held by Democrats between 2006 and 2012, and only 5.8% of Americans are in juris-

ditions with complete Republican control. Note that in calculating all these numbers, we ignore Presidential results, which are aggregated to the state level but obviously do not imply that the state-level victor serves in office. Yet even if we ignore all statewide offices (light gray areas in Figure 5), the majority of Americans (54%) reside in jurisdictions that have seen a mix of representation in U.S. House and state legislative offices, either across years or offices.

The empirical fact that almost all voters are represented by both political parties is an enduring feature of the American Constitutional system. Both the division of power between federal and state governments and the extended sphere of the republic purposefully make it difficult for one faction to wholly dominate another. That both parties contest nearly the whole country and win offices across the country is a testament to American founders' foresight.

There are also practical consequences to nearly all voters being represented by both parties during a short period of time. First, no matter where they live, voters have a like-minded partisan in some office that represents them. Recent field experiments have shown that voters prefer interacting with like-minded representatives and that representatives might even favor co-partisans in their responses to constituent service requests (Broockman and Ryan, 2015). What we discover here is that most voters do indeed have the opportunity to interact with a co-partisan leader. This may help to explain why politicians for many offices all engage in similar constituent service activities. Even if a voter only would seek help from a politician of one party, she is almost always able to do so.

Second, survey evidence suggests that voters are more favorably disposed to legislative institutions when they voted for the winner (Brunell, 2008). Our evidence suggests that nearly all voters have recently voted for an eventual winning candidate. This may foster deeper commitment to political institutions than we might otherwise expect.

Third, the fact of bipartisan representation is important because it means that when voters are deciding whether or not to keep an incumbent in any one office, they have some sense of what it would be like to be represented by the other party. In casting a vote against an incumbent, the voter's decision is made easier because it is not a complex counterfactual to imagine an office changing hands. Voters experience representation by both parties almost all of the time.

Conclusion

Scholars have long sought to understand the causes and consequences of *uncompetitive* elections. We aim to shift the debate to understanding the causes and consequences of the *competitive* electoral environment nearly all Americans experience. Frequent elections across many offices in different jurisdictions generate hierarchical, geographic, and temporal variation in the locus of competition. In spite of partisan fidelity and elite polarization,

American voters regularly experience competition. The high rate of competition is difficult to see if one only investigates a single office in a single year, but comes into clear focus when one takes a broader view. Eighty-nine percent of Americans saw a competitive election between 2006 and 2012. About half of the states have never in a century gone more than four election cycles without a competitive statewide election. When comparing competition with expectations in the literature, earlier historical eras, or other countries, the amount of competition in the United States either meets or exceeds any of these standards. Our analysis further demonstrates that frequent, dispersed competition translates into mixed partisan control. In a recent period of six years, 89% of Americans were also represented by both parties in at least one major office in at least one cycle.

Our results have important implications for scholarly research and for public policy. For researchers, our analysis yields a clear question for future work: why is there so *much* competition in American elections? The level of competition we uncover is quite incongruous with conventional views of voting behavior, but we have laid out a number of mechanisms suggested by the literature. By analyzing how the same voters behave at different points in time and in elections for different offices, scholars can better assess why competition appears in so many different electoral contexts. In our opinion, such studies will be a fruitful next step in this research agenda.

For public policy, our analysis calls for a re-thinking of the premise of a wide-ranging reform agenda. Some reformers are concerned about specific offices, like the U.S. House being consistently, and perhaps increasingly, uncompetitive. As we show, between 2006 and 2012, about two-thirds of voters did not see a competitive House election even once. For those pursuing redistricting reform or term limits aimed at increasing the number of House districts hosting competitive elections, our evidence does not challenge the point that House districts are typically uncompetitive. However, for reforms aimed at increasing competition *overall* (i.e. not for specific offices), such as ballot access reform and campaign finance reform, our analysis suggests that there might not be a broader competitiveness problem to be solved. Of course, this does not mean that such reforms are bad ideas, but rather that these reforms should not be pursued to solve the problem of competitiveness. The truth is that American elections are characterized by robust competition.

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