

# Candidate Quality, Incumbency, and Election Outcomes in the United States\*

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## Abstract

In today's politically polarized era, how much does candidate quality matter in elections? Spatial models predict that valence factors, such as candidate quality, matter less to voters as differences between the parties increase. In this paper I examine the link between candidate quality and incumbency effects, and how the importance of each has changed over time. I estimate that candidate quality explains about one-third of incumbency effects, and that incumbency status explains only about one-fourth of candidate quality effects. I show that while incumbency effects peaked in the 1980s and slowly declined since, candidate quality effects gradually increased from the 1950s until 2010 despite significant polarization, but then experienced a sharp decline over the past decade. I also show that the decrease in competitive elections over time – and particularly after 2010 – has reduced the share of elections where candidate quality effects can plausibly alter an election's outcome.

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# 1 Introduction

Elections provide a mechanism for voters to select high quality candidates to represent them in governing institutions. The quality of candidates and politicians is important because it affects the value of government to its citizens. Higher quality candidates are less corrupt, better at legislating and leading, and work harder for their constituents. Periodic elections in the United States present a way for voters to reward these good behaviors and punish low quality politicians by removing them from office.

Early research in U.S. electoral politics focused on the importance of candidates and candidate related factors in determining election outcomes. Candidate quality was thought to be of increasing importance due to the similarity between the parties in the mid-20th century.<sup>1</sup> As such, political scientists noted the decline in the strength of political parties and the rise of “candidate-centered” politics after the post-war period (Wattenberg, 1991). Other foundational work examined the electoral success of politicians due to candidates’ “home-styles” (Fenno, 1978), constituency service (Mayhew, 1974a), the “personal vote” (Cain et al., 1987), and even rising incumbency advantages (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981; Gelman and King, 1990) – all candidate-based explanations for electoral success, that seemed only to be increasing in importance.

Incumbency effects in particular have been studied extensively, and a lot of work has been done trying to figure out where incumbency advantages come from. Candidate quality is one potential explanation for the continued success of incumbent politicians – namely, that incumbents have already won an election (or many elections) and are therefore already selected on quality – but there are also many other potential explanation for these advantages, such as name recognition or fundraising ability, which are not necessarily candidate quality related. Hence, determining *how much* of the incumbency advantage is due to candidate quality is an important question in the literature, one that is still difficult to answer today due to the lack of good measures of candidate quality.

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<sup>1</sup>As a demonstration of such concern, see “Towards A More Responsible Two-Party System”, a report

While candidate-related explanations of electoral success were the center of attention in the field of U.S. electoral politics for decades, the focus has recently shifted to the dramatic rise in political polarization in the United States and its impact on electoral outcomes and public policy. Polarization is a considerable change to the electoral landscape, and has affected politics in many ways; accordingly, political scientists have shifted their attention from candidates-based explanations to analyzing more systemic factors of political institutions that affect election outcomes and representation. Traditional spatial models of vote choice also predict that with the rise of political polarization over the past few decades, valence issues such as candidate quality will have a smaller effect on voter behavior. Some point to declining incumbency effects as evidence of the decline in the importance of candidate quality, but research on incumbency effects over time does not distinguish between candidate quality effects *per se* and other non-quality related incumbent advantages. While theoretically intuitive, the predicted decline in the effects of candidate quality on election results over time has never been documented.

In this paper, I use the endorsement-based measure of the differences in candidate quality from DeLuca (2023) to demonstrate how the importance of candidate quality and incumbency have changed over time with the rise in polarization that occurred between 1950-2020. The endorsement-based candidate quality differentials have many advantages over previous measures of candidate quality, and are specifically useful in that they are not defined by previous electoral success, as is the case with most common measures of candidate quality, such as incumbency and prior elected office experience. Using the endorsement-based quality differentials paired with election outcomes for president, governor, U.S. Senate, U.S. House, and select statewide and state legislative elections, I broadly examine the effects of incumbency and quality, and the relationship between them, across thousands of elections in the United States.

Throughout the analysis, I evaluate the importance of candidate quality in various ways. The results show substantial effects of candidate quality on two-party vote shares and on a

candidate’s probability of winning their election. In general, the higher quality candidate in a race gets elected a large majority of the time, and when incumbents lose their seats they are much more likely to be lower quality than their non-incumbent challengers. I also find that candidate quality accounts for about one-third of estimated incumbency effects, similar to other estimates in the literature, and that incumbency accounts for slightly more than one-fourth (28%) of overall candidate quality effects. These empirical estimates demonstrate that quality effects and incumbency effects are different (although related) phenomena, and furthermore this distinction allows for a more nuanced analysis of the evolution of incumbency and quality effects over time.

Finally, I document both the trends in incumbency effects and candidate quality effects, starting from the 1950s until the late 2010s. I show that while incumbency effects peaked in the late 1980s and have slowly declined since, quality effects increase gradually from the 1950s until around 2010, after which they sharply decline by about 50%. Similarly, the system-wide importance of candidate quality has diminished significantly around 2010, due to the dramatic decline in the share of competitive elections where candidate quality could plausibly change the final outcome. I conclude by presenting possible explanations for these trends, what they can teach us about voter behavior and preferences, and how they might affect the quality of representation and political dysfunction in present times.

## 2 Candidate Quality, Incumbency, and Polarization

Typically, researchers conceive of candidate quality as being related to the capabilities and effectiveness of politicians. Political scientists often refer to candidate quality as a “valence” component of candidate characteristics that are valued by voters, but one that is not policy related – commonly, these are personal quality of candidates such as being competent, honest, non-corrupt, or charismatic (Stokes, 1963). Voters should want to elect higher quality candidates, all else being equal, if they value an effective, efficient, and capable representatives

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and government.

In an electoral context, numerous formal models incorporate valence features into an individual’s vote choice (Ansolabehere and Snyder, 2000; Groseclose, 2001; Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2009; Adams et al., 2011; Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2018). A key feature of these models is that the relative importance of candidate quality and other valence characteristics will depend on the ideal point of the voter: moderate voters, who are closer to being indifferent between the two parties, will be more sensitive to differences in candidate quality, whereas more ideologically extreme voters will be less likely to alter their vote due to valence issues. The distance between the party platforms also matters: valence issues will be more influential when there are fewer differences between candidate platforms (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2009).

While under-discussed in the literature, a prediction that comes straight out of these models is that an increase in political polarization should decrease the importance of candidate quality to voters. Even if a voter thinks a candidate is highly competent, they still may not vote for them if the candidate takes policy positions the voter doesn’t like – and this is particularly true if the candidates takes extreme positions that are antithetical to the voter’s preferences.<sup>2</sup> The importance of valence issues like candidate quality can also be reduced if voters themselves become polarized; as a voter’s ideal point becomes more extreme in one direction or the other, this also has the effect of increasing the relative importance of ideology and reducing the influence of candidate quality in that individual’s vote choice decision. In any of these instances of polarization, the voter’s choice of who to vote for will depend less on candidate quality and more on ideological preference. Empirically, however, it is hard to quantify the effects of candidate quality on electoral outcomes, since it is difficult to measure candidate quality, and so to date there is no clear evidence that the impact of quality has declined over time.

One common proxy measure of candidate quality is incumbency status. Theoretically, in-

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<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., the model in Hall and Thompson (2018).

cumbents should be more likely to be high quality, given that they've already won an election. In the past, the focus on incumbency advantages in the context of elections stemmed from a concern over high incumbent reelection rates, which suggested they faced little competition and hence had little incentive to work hard. Other incumbency factors like name recognition, fundraising ability, and other non-quality related benefits of incumbency might reduce the importance of candidate quality itself in the electoral selection process, because even low-quality incumbents would gain these advantages and face less electoral pressure. Incumbents may easily win reelection due to the fact that they are higher quality; or, strong incumbency advantages, paired with high incumbent reelection rates and low electoral competition, might actually reduce the ability of voters to hold politicians accountable for corrupt behavior and bad performance while in office. In this way, incumbency advantages could actually reduce the quality of candidates overall and result in a worse functioning government. Therefore, distinguishing between candidate quality and other incumbency related effects is important when trying to assess the ability of voters and the electoral system to pick and retain high quality representatives and leaders.

Given that the increase in political polarization in Congress since the 1950s has been well documented ([McCarty et al., 2016](#)), valence models would predict that the importance of candidate quality would decrease over time as polarization rises, and would be low in the present era. Numerous studies of the size of incumbency effects at least partially confirm this theory, at least to the extent that incumbency advantages are related to candidate quality. Incumbency advantages increased from the 1950s until their peak in the 1980s, and have been gradually declining since ([Gelman and King, 1990](#); [Ansolabehere and Snyder, 2002](#); [Jacobson, 2015](#); [Jacobson and Carson, 2019](#)). But a decline in incumbency effects does not necessarily imply that candidate quality matters less to voters, especially considering that research suggests at most only half of these incumbency effects are explained by candidate quality itself. For example, some work finds that candidate quality still matters even in times of high political polarization, such as the late 1800s, despite the fact that incumbency

effects were very low during this same period as many of the modern explanations of direct incumbency advantages did not exist at the time (Carson et al., 2007). Other recent research has shown that rates of split ticket voting in down-ballot offices is still relatively common and is correlated with indicators of candidate quality (Kuriwaki, 2023), and many news organizations,<sup>3</sup> politicians,<sup>4</sup> and political pundits<sup>5</sup> believe that candidate quality still matters even in these highly polarized times.

Empirically estimating the effects of candidate quality, both in general and over time, can help us resolve some of these contemporary and historical debates in a number of ways. First, examining whether trends in candidate quality effects mirror the decline in incumbency effects will help political scientists better understand why incumbency advantages are declining in the first place – for example, whether it is due to a decline in the importance of quality, as predicted by spatial models, or due to other external factors, like a change in campaign financing advantages or the decline in the ability of incumbents to gain favorable news coverage (perhaps due to the rise of social media or partisan news organizations). Second, quantifying the importance of candidate quality, and its effect on election outcomes, speaks to the ability of voters to choose high quality candidates to represent them in government, and a decline in the quality of elected officials may help explain legislative gridlock and political dysfunction in present times. And last, quantifying the extent to which candidate quality matters to voters over time also reflects important changes in the electorate, and shows the extent to which voters (still) value quality, regardless of whether quality differences still have the potential to change election results.

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<sup>3</sup>“Candidate Quality Mattered”, Nate Silver, 9 November 2022.

<sup>4</sup>“McConnell says Republicans may not win Senate control, citing ‘candidate quality’”, Sahil Kapur and Frank Thorp V, 18 August 2022.

<sup>5</sup>“Candidate Quality Cost Statewide Republicans In 2022, Lakshya Jain and arminthomas, 20 November 2022.”

### 3 Data: Endorsement-Based Quality Differentials

To estimate the importance of candidate quality in elections and its relation to incumbency effects, I utilize the newspaper endorsement-based candidate quality differentials from DeLuca (2023). The endorsement-based quality differentials are akin to expert judgements of candidate quality, and DeLuca (2023) presents extensive evidence confirming their validity. The quality differentials reflect a relative quality difference between the Democratic and Republican candidates running in a partisan race, as indicated by their likelihood of being endorsed by local newspapers while adjusting for the partisan bias of the newspapers making endorsements. A strong benefit of this measure is that it reflects a more holistic evaluation of each candidates' quality rather than particular components, and captures hard-to-measure qualities of candidates like their competency and perceived leadership abilities. Unlike previous work which estimates candidate quality effects indirectly or which relies on coarse measures of quality such as prior experience, the endorsement-based quality differential allows me to differentiate between (direct) incumbency effects and the effects of candidate quality *per se*.

DeLuca (2023) estimates candidate quality differentials for 6,502 elections, using over 22,000 local newspapers endorsements. These include quality differential estimates for executive and statewide offices, Congressional elections (both House and Senate), and even local elections like county commissioner, water conservation board, and sheriff. In this paper, I analyze election outcomes in all presidential, gubernatorial, U.S. Senate, U.S. House, and select statewide office and state legislative elections between 1950-2022 for which quality differentials are estimated from the endorsement data (which includes 4,256 elections in total). The wide variety of elections in the sample allows for a broad assessment of the effects of incumbency advantages as well as candidate quality effects, both over time and across office types.

Election outcome data for U.S. House, U.S. Senate, Governor, and Presidential elections comes from CQ Press Library (2022).<sup>6</sup> Statewide office elections include lieutenant governor,

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<sup>6</sup>As of writing, only partial data for 2022 elections is available in the CQ Voting and Elections Collection



secretary of state, treasurer, auditor, comptroller, agricultural commissioner, state board of education, labor commissioner, mine commissioner, and attorney general.<sup>7</sup> Outcomes for state legislative elections between 1967-2016 comes from [Klarner \(2018\)](#), and multi-member state legislative districts are dropped from the analysis due to the fact that it is not clear which of the multiple candidate comparisons are reflected in newspaper endorsements in multi-member district elections. Due to the difficulty in compiling historical local election results, they are not currently include these in the analyses, which limits the results in this paper to non-local elections.

The endorsement-based candidate quality differential estimates merged to election outcomes provide a way to investigate substantive questions about the effects of candidate quality on voter behavior and election outcomes, along with questions about whether elections generally do a good job selecting high quality candidates to govern. For example, how do higher quality candidate win their elections, and how often does the lower quality candidate win despite being lower quality? How do differences in candidate quality affect vote shares, or the probability of winning? And have the effects of candidate quality been reduced over time with the rise in political polarization? The answers to these substantive questions are important to assessing the degree to which the quality differences play a role in determining who gets elected and, ultimately, who governs and creates public policy.

## 4 Candidate Quality and Election Outcomes

### 4.1 Selecting High Quality Candidates

How often do higher quality candidates win in elections? [Table 1](#) show the rates at which the higher quality candidate wins, conditional on the type of election and the party of the higher quality candidate, as indicated by the rows of the table. Overall, the higher quality candidate

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<sup>7</sup>These data were generously provided to me by Jim Snyder. Not all statewide election outcomes are available in all years, so the analysis is limited to cases where both statewide office election results and endorsement-based quality differentials are available.

wins in a large majority of elections, 77.2% of the time. High quality Republicans are slightly less likely to win their elections relative to high quality Democrats (75.2% win rate relative to a 79.1% win rate). The second panel of Table 1 shows that when there are large quality differences between the candidates – larger than one standard deviation in either direction – the winning rates of the higher quality candidate rises to 87.1% on average. The fact that higher quality candidates win when the differences are larger suggests voters place significant value on candidate quality.

Table 1: Selecting High Quality Candidates

	Winner		N Elections
	High Quality	Low Quality	
<i>All Races</i>	<b>77.2%</b>	<b>22.8%</b>	<b>4,256</b>
High Quality R Candidate	75.2%	24.8%	2,021
High Quality D Candidate	79.1%	20.9%	2,235
<i>&gt; 1 Std Dev Quality Differences</i>	<b>87.1%</b>	<b>12.9%</b>	<b>1,690</b>
High Quality R Candidate	88.3%	11.7%	896
High Quality D Candidate	85.8%	14.2%	794
<i>Incumbents Running</i>	<b>80.5%</b>	<b>19.5%</b>	<b>3,406</b>
High Quality R Candidate	77.9%	22.1%	1,610
High Quality D Candidate	82.7%	17.3%	1,796
<i>High Quality Incumbents</i>	<b>93.0%</b>	<b>7.0%</b>	<b>2,758</b>
High Quality Incumbent R	92.9%	7.1%	1,259
High Quality Incumbent D	93.2%	6.8%	1,499
<i>Open Seats</i>	<b>64.4%</b>	<b>35.7%</b>	<b>850</b>
High Quality R Candidate	64.5%	35.5%	411
High Quality D Candidate	64.2%	35.8%	439

Notes: Cells report the percentage of races won by either the higher or lower quality candidate (as indicated by the columns), conditional on the type of election (all races, races with large quality differentials greater than 1 standard deviation difference, races with incumbents running for reelection, races where the incumbent is running and the incumbent is higher quality, and open seat races) as well as the partisan affiliation of the high quality candidate. Sample includes only elections for which candidate quality differentials could be estimated and merged to election results.

For races where incumbents are running (third panel of [Table 1](#)), the rate at which the higher quality candidate wins is 80.5%. This is due to the correlation between incumbency status and quality; incumbents are more likely to be higher quality candidates, and additionally may reap the benefits of non-quality related electoral advantages of being an incumbent, further increasing the odds that they win their elections. Additionally, being an incumbent may in fact *make* candidates higher quality through gaining valuable experience and social connections while serving in office. When focusing on cases where the incumbents themselves are the higher quality candidate (fourth panel of [Table 1](#)), the higher quality candidate (the incumbent) wins 93% of the time. These high rates of incumbent reelection are not surprising ([Mayhew, 1974b](#); [Abramowitz et al., 2006](#); [Friedman and Holden, 2009](#)). But the third and fourth panels of [Table 1](#) demonstrate that quality itself matters even for incumbents.

The last panel of [Table 1](#) shows that in open seat races, high quality candidates win 64.4% of the time, with essentially no differences in the win rates of high quality candidates across parties. These seats have the lowest win rate for high quality candidates across election subsets analyzed in [Table 1](#), which is notable given the importance of open seat races in the candidate selection process (winners of open seat races go on to enjoy incumbency advantages in the future, making them more likely to stay in office over time). In open seats, 37% of Republicans who win are worse quality than their Democratic opponents, while 34% of Democrats who win are worse quality than their Republican opponents. In part, the lower win rates of high quality candidates here is due to the fact that the differences in candidate quality in open seats is typically smaller than quality differentials in seats where incumbents are running.<sup>8</sup> It is also possible that voters have a harder time discerning who is higher quality in open seat races, where neither candidate has a record of performance in office. Despite these factors, high quality candidates still win almost two-thirds of the time in open seat races, further suggesting the importance of candidate quality in election outcomes.

The high likelihood of the better quality candidates winning across a variety of electoral

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<sup>8</sup>See [Figure 1](#) in the next section.

circumstances is good news for elections and democracy in the United States. A process where, over time, voters choose the higher quality candidate at such a high rate would imply that a very large share of representatives at any given moment are high quality candidates. In cases where candidate quality differences are larger, voters are more likely to select the high quality candidate, and high quality incumbents of either party are hardly ever thrown out of office. Even in open seats, where candidate quality is more evenly matched and where it may be hard to assess candidate quality, voters select the higher quality candidate nearly two-thirds of the time. The basic facts presented here characterize an electoral system that typically values candidate quality and selects for the higher quality candidate when voters are presented with the choice.

## 4.2 Incumbent and Winner Quality

DeLuca (2023) shows that much of but not all of the variation in newspaper endorsement decisions can be predicted using common proxy measures of candidate quality. While the results from DeLuca (2023) alone demonstrate that the endorsement-based quality differentials are indicative of candidate quality differences, I further confirm that intuition here by examining the distribution of quality differentials of incumbents and open seat winners. I also use the endorsement-based measure of candidate quality to differentiate between candidate quality effects and direct incumbency effects – which are incumbency effect that are *not* explained by differences in candidate quality – in order to assess the extent to which incumbency advantages are really just quality advantages.

Given the prior research on the relationship between incumbency and candidate quality, incumbents ought to often be the higher quality candidate in their races. In general, the statistics in Table 1 confirm this. But the quality differentials from DeLuca (2023) also allow for a more nuanced analysis of the typical quality advantages of incumbents, because in addition to indicating which of two candidates is higher quality they also provide an estimate of how large quality differences are. In Figure 1, I plot distributions of the estimated

candidate quality differentials by election type (incumbents running or open seats). The left panel shows the estimated candidate quality differentials for incumbent candidates, separately for Republicans and Democrats, for all elections included in the estimation sample. I multiply the standardized candidate quality differential estimates for Republican incumbents by  $-1$ , so that the quality differential on the x-axis is the quality of the incumbent relative to their challenger and higher values indicate that the incumbent candidate is higher quality than their challenger, regardless of party.

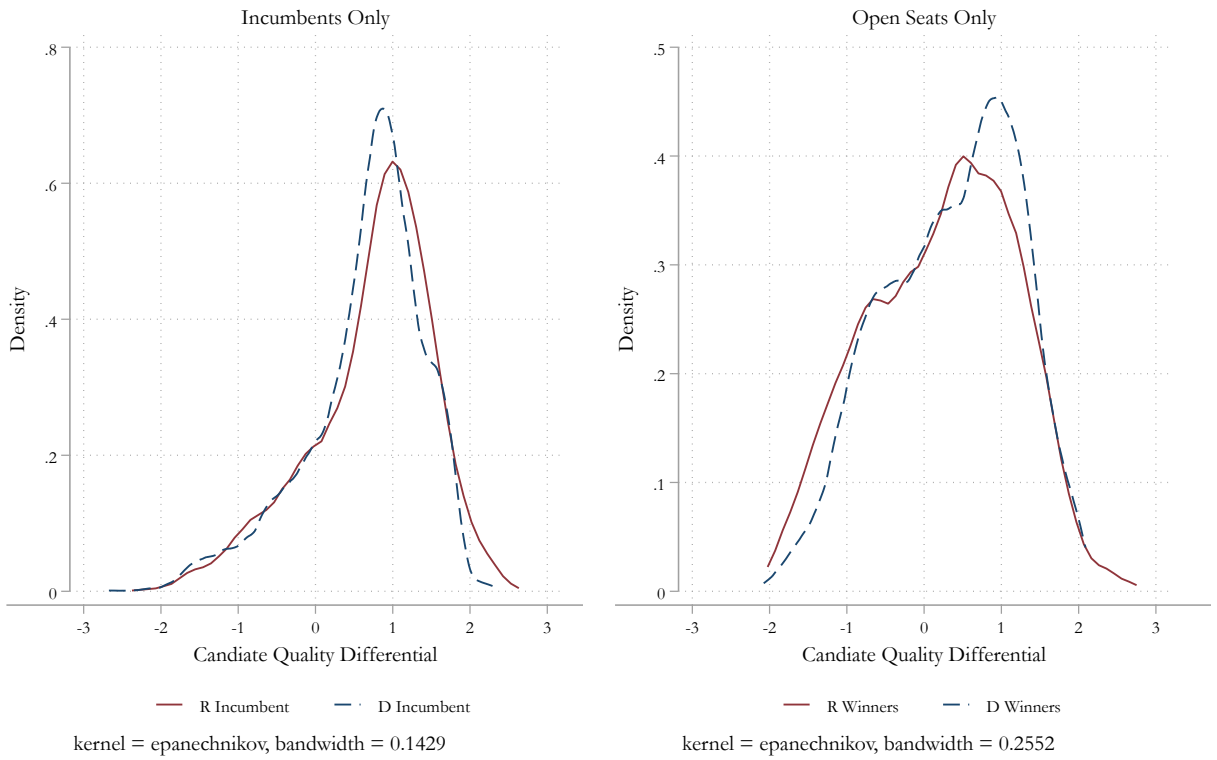


Figure 1: Candidate Quality Distributions, by Election Type and Party

The left panel demonstrates that incumbents of both parties are usually significantly higher quality than their challengers, with the modal incumbent quality advantage being around 1 standard deviation in magnitude. Of note, however, is that the distribution of incumbent quality differentials has a small but substantial density below zero – meaning that there is a significant share of incumbents (about 18.4%) who are actually of *lower* quality

than their challengers. Also according to the data, incumbents who win their elections have average quality differentials of 0.86 (Republicans) and 0.70 (Democrats), whereas incumbents who lose their elections have average quality differentials of 0.08 (Republicans) and 0.13 (Democrats). Almost half of all incumbents (46%) who lose their election are lower quality than their challengers. In general, non-incumbent candidates who win open seat races should also be higher quality than their challengers. The right panel of [Figure 1](#) plots the distribution of quality differentials for the winners in open seat races (i.e., the relative quality difference between the winner and loser of an open seat race). The quality distribution of winners in open seat races is much flatter than that of incumbents, and the win rates of the higher quality candidate in these situations is significantly lower (see [Table 1](#)). However, the winners of open seat races are still typically the higher quality candidate in the race, and often when a lower quality candidate wins an open seat their quality *disadvantage* is small. The distributions in [Figure 1](#) confirm long-running assertions that incumbents are typically higher quality than their challengers.

To formally estimate the actual effects of quality and incumbency on election results, I run regressions of electoral performance – either two-party vote shares or the probability of winning – on candidate quality differentials and on an incumbency status indicator variable. The results of various specifications of the regressions are presented in [Table 2](#). Similar to [DeLuca \(2023\)](#), I include year and constituency fixed effects in each of the specifications as control variables.<sup>9</sup> The specifications of the model with and without incumbency included in the regression provide estimates of how much incumbency matters, and the extent to which the coefficients on candidate quality changes when incumbency is included in the regression demonstrates how much of candidate quality effects can be explained by incumbency status.

Without controlling for incumbency (column 1), a one standard deviation increase in candidate quality differentials is associated with a 5.3 percentage point increase in two party vote shares. These estimates of the effect of candidate quality differentials on vote shares

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<sup>9</sup>Also as in [DeLuca \(2023\)](#), constituency fixed effects are an indicator variable for a constituency, which is defined as a state-decade indicator variables for any statewide office, and is defined as an indicator variable

are in line with other studies that use survey measures to estimate the effects of (relative differences in) candidate quality on electoral performance (Stone et al., 2010; Buttice and Stone, 2012). The version of the model with just an incumbency indicator variable, without including the quality differential variable (column 2), estimates incumbency effects to be 5.4 percentage points, which is a plausible size given that the elections in the regression span from 1950-2022 and include periods of high and low incumbency advantages.

Table 2: Effects of Quality Differentials on Election Results

VARIABLES	(1) D Vote	(2) D Vote	(3) D Vote	(4) P(D Win)	(5) P(D Win)	(6) P(D Win)
Quality Differential	0.053*** (0.002)		0.038*** (0.002)	0.195*** (0.009)		0.141*** (0.010)
Incumbency		0.054*** (0.002)	0.037*** (0.002)		0.192*** (0.010)	0.129*** (0.011)
Observations	3,259	3,185	3,185	3,259	3,185	3,185
Adjusted R-squared	0.801	0.799	0.834	0.581	0.577	0.612
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constituency FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes: Sample includes contested elections for President, Governor, U.S. Senate, U.S. House, select statewide elections, and single-member state legislative elections (1967-2016), in years 1950-2022. Outcome for columns 1-3 is the Democratic two-party vote share in the election (“D Vote”). Outcome for columns 4-6 is a binary variable indicating a Democratic election victory (“P(D Win)”). The “Quality Differential” variable is coded so that negative quality differentials indicate that the Republican is higher quality while positive values indicate that the Democrat is higher quality. Incumbency is coded as +1 for a Democratic incumbent, −1 for a Republican incumbent, and 0 for open seats. \* =  $p < 0.10$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.01$ .

Including both quality and incumbency in the regression (column 3) causes the coefficient on quality differential to decrease from 5.3 points to 3.8 points (a 28% decrease), and also causes the coefficient on incumbency to decrease from 5.4 points to 3.7 points (a 32% decrease). These changes in coefficient estimates imply that slightly more than one-fourth of quality effects are explained by incumbency status, while one-third of incumbency effects at the district level for U.S. House and state legislative districts, which change due to redistricting.

are due to candidate quality.<sup>10</sup> Consistent with this decomposition, others who have attempted to separate incumbency advantages into quality versus non-quality related aspects also tend to find that around one-third to one-half of observed incumbency advantages are due to candidate quality itself, even when using very different identification strategies (Levitt and Wolfram, 1997; Ansolabehere et al., 2000; Hirano and Snyder, 2009). The coefficients in column 3 can be interpreted as candidate quality effects and *direct* incumbency effects – incumbent candidate advantages such as name recognition, media coverage, or better campaign funding (Cox and Katz, 1996), which improve their electoral performance but are not aspects of candidate quality *per se*.

The findings from columns 1-3 of Table 2 also suggest that while a significant portion of quality is explained by incumbency – a little more than one-fourth of the quality effects – most of it is not captured by incumbency. So while the previous analysis here shows that incumbents are very often higher quality candidate in their race, consistent with work that uses incumbency as a proxy for quality, in terms of effects on electoral performance a majority of incumbency effects are actually *not* due to candidate quality. Additionally, the results show that a majority of quality effects are *not* simply explained by incumbency status. Incumbency effect and quality effects are different – though related – phenomena, and it suggests that the existing literature on these topics may have been overestimating the importance of incumbency by conflating the two (Ansolabehere and Snyder, 2002; Jacobson, 2015).

While the effects on vote shares reveal the extent to which voters vote for higher quality candidates, ultimately, what matters from the perspective of representation is not just whether voters care about quality, but also to what extent the electoral system allows for higher quality candidates to be elected by the voters that value them. In columns 4-6 of Table 2, the same regression specifications are used as in columns 1-3, but instead of two-

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<sup>10</sup>I run additional robustness checks on these results in appendix section A, where I use the legislator CF-score extremity-adjusted quality measures from DeLuca (2023), and show that while the coefficients are slightly smaller, the estimated effects of candidate quality are still statistically significant and display the same relationship with incumbency effects as the results in Table 2.



party vote shares the outcomes is the probability of the Democratic candidate winning (“P(D Win)”). The results show that having higher quality differentials significantly increases the probability that a candidate will win their election by 19.5 percentage points without controlling for incumbency, and by 14.1 percentage points when incumbency controls are added. The relative decreases of the coefficients on quality (column 4) and incumbency (column 5) when including both (column 6) are similar to the decreases in effect sizes seen in the first 3 columns.

In [Table 3](#), I test whether the effects of candidate quality on votes shares varies across different office types.<sup>11</sup> Some theories of accountability and performance predict that the quality of elected officials will matter more for executive positions, like governor or attorney general, where competency in running government is more important to voters, and that candidate quality will matter less for legislative offices, where each candidate is just one of many (often hundreds of) politicians voting on legislation. There are also competing theories about how much candidate quality matters in more localized elections vs. statewide or national elections, due to differences in voter and media attention across different kinds of races. On the one hand, quality might matter a lot for more local offices like county commissioner or sheriff, where constituents will be directly affected by a good (or bad) quality person serving in the elected position. On the other hand, local elections often have lower media coverage, lower turnout, and in general lower public interest, meaning that voters may know less about candidate quality in local elections and therefore might fall back on partisan cues to make their choice, or that only the most partisan voters (who care the least about candidate quality) turn out in local elections. Across specifications in [Table 3](#), I find the largest effects of quality are for Governor, U.S. Senate, and other statewide office races, and I find lower effects for U.S. House and state legislative elections, which is consistent with theories about the importance of quality across offices or about voter attention and turnout for local vs. statewide or national elections.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>I also present the results using the probability of winning as the outcome variable in appendix [section A](#).

<sup>12</sup>While consistent with voters caring more about quality in those races, it could also be that voters (and

Table 3: Effect of Quality on Vote Shares, by Office Type

VARIABLES	(1) US Senate	(2) Governor	(3) Other Statewide	(4) US House	(5) State Leg
Quality Differential	0.047*** (0.006)	0.039*** (0.007)	0.041*** (0.003)	0.027*** (0.003)	0.032*** (0.005)
Incumbency	0.040*** (0.005)	0.023*** (0.007)	0.017*** (0.004)	0.049*** (0.003)	0.030*** (0.006)
Observations	423	336	370	1,556	388
Adjusted R-squared	0.706	0.481	0.687	0.908	0.854
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constituency FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes: Sample includes all elections in the endorsement data for which candidate quality differentials could be estimated and merged to election data, for years 1950-2022. Column 1 uses only elections for US Senate; column 2 uses only elections for Governor; column 3 uses all other statewide office elections; column 4 uses only elections for U.S. House; and column 5 uses only state legislative elections (in years 1967-2016). Outcome for each specification is the Democratic two-party vote share in the election (“D Vote”). The “Quality Differential” variable is coded so that negative quality differentials indicate that the Republican is higher quality while positive values indicate that the Democrat is higher quality. Incumbency is coded as +1 for a Democratic incumbent, -1 for a Republican incumbent, and 0 for open seats.

\* =  $p < 0.10$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.01$ .

### 4.3 Quality and Incumbency Effects Over Time

A narrative in the popular media is that the increase in political polarization over the past few decades means that candidate quality doesn’t matter as much as it previously did. This idea – that polarization decreases the influence of quality on election outcomes – is also predicted directly from standard vote choice models that include candidate valence. In this final section, I examine the evolution of candidate quality and incumbency effects over time to see whether the effects of candidate quality differentials on election outcomes has diminished over time with the rise of political polarization.

First, I run a regression of two-party vote shares on incumbency without controlling for newspapers) are just more certain about candidate quality in statewide races generally, including U.S. Senate races, and hence there is more measurement error in the quality estimates for U.S. House and state legislative candidates, biasing the estimated effects of candidate quality towards 0 in those specifications.

quality (as in column 2 of Table 2) on rolling subsets of elections over time between the years 1954-2018 and record the coefficient on incumbency.<sup>13</sup> Second, I run a regression of two-party vote shares on both quality and incumbency (as in column 3 of Table 2) on the same subsets of elections over time and record both the direct incumbency effects (i.e., incumbency effects controlling for quality) and quality effects (while controlling for incumbency). I plot the point estimates and smoothed trend line results over time in Figure 2.

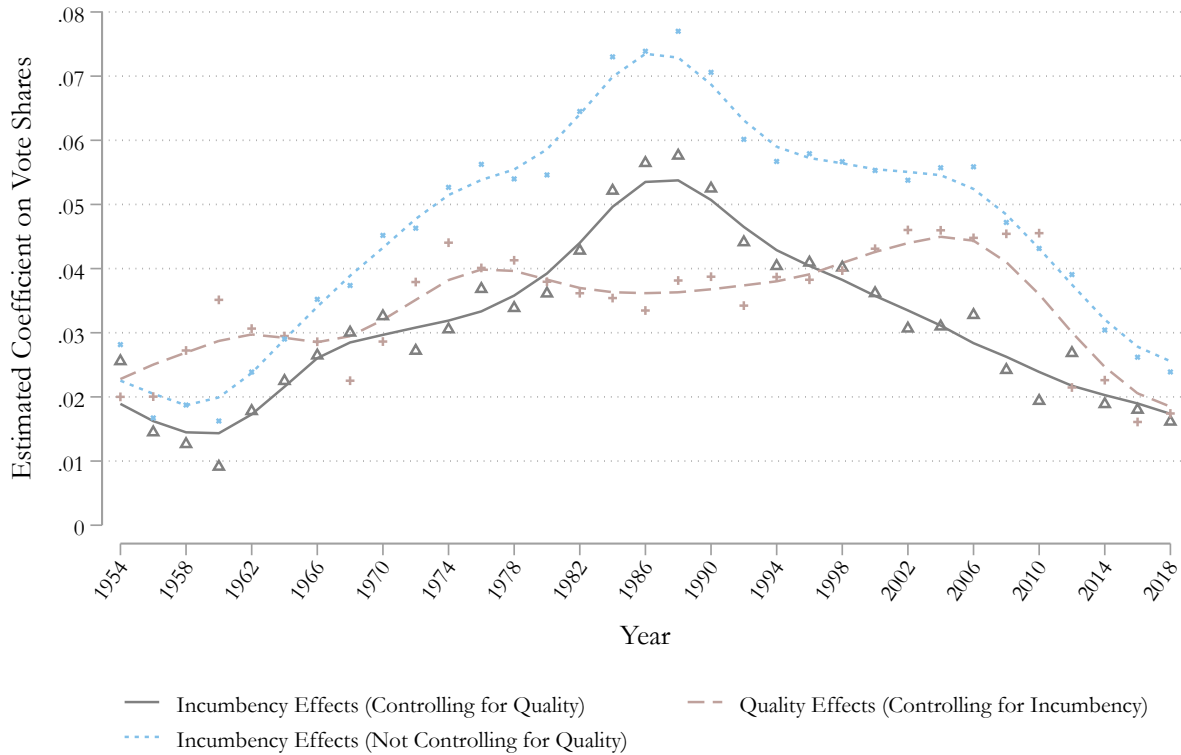


Figure 2: Quality and Incumbency Effects Over Time

Looking at incumbency effects without controlling for quality (the top, small-dashed, light blue line), Figure 2 exhibits a well-known trend in incumbency effects – the rise of incumbency effects from the 1950s up until it peaks around 7-8 percentage points the late 1980s, followed by decline which steepens around 2010 (Gelman and King, 1990; Ansolabehere

<sup>13</sup>I run each year's analysis on all elections during the year indicated on the x-axis, plus or minus two election cycles – so that each point estimate is a decade of elections. This procedure smooths the estimates and captures longer-term trends over this 70 year time period. As such, I start the analysis in 1954 (which includes 1950, the start of my sample) and end in 2018 (which includes 2022, the end of my sample).

and Snyder, 2002; Jacobson, 2015; Jacobson and Carson, 2019). This result relieves concerns about whether the sample of elections used in this analysis is representative of all elections, as it shows the same trends in incumbency effects as other research. When controlling for candidate quality, the direct incumbency effects (solid, grey line, with triangle points) also displays the same trends over time, though the decline from 1988-2018 is much more gradual and steady. Controlling for candidate quality differentials reduces the estimated incumbency effects at their peak (and across most of the time period) by about 2 percentage points, again suggesting that around one-third of incumbency effects are due to candidate quality effects.

Focusing on quality effects (the long-dashed line, with crosses as points), a different pattern over time emerges. Quality effects, like incumbency effects, were also somewhat low in the 1950s – about 2 percentage points – and they also gradually increased over time along with incumbency effects. However, when incumbency effects reach their peak and then begin their decline in the late 1980s, quality effects do not. In fact, quality effects continued to increase until their peak at around 4.5 percentage points in 2010. This is despite the fact that partisan polarization begins increasing quite dramatically in the 1980s, and remains at all-time high levels today. Starting around 2008 or so, however, quality effects decreased quite dramatically, declining by more than 50% by 2018.<sup>14</sup>

The trends in [Figure 2](#) provide additional evidence of the fact that the endorsement-based quality differential is picking up different effects than just the effects of being an incumbent. The evolution of these trends over time paints a more nuanced story about the importance of incumbency and quality in an electoral context: while incumbency effects peaked in the late 1980s, the importance of quality peaked in the late 2000s, and the sharp decline in quality effects throughout the 2010s can explain much of the sharp decline in incumbency effects observed during the same time period. One interpretation is that the overall incumbency effect declined by about 3 percentage points from 2006-2018, and that two-thirds of that decline was due to the decline in quality effects, while only one-third of the decline was due

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<sup>14</sup>The point estimates actually decline from a peak of 4.55 points in 2010 down to 1.65 points in 2018, a 64% decline (though the smoothing trend lines on the figure hide this).

to a decline in direct incumbency effects. In contrast, incumbency effects also declined by about 2 percentage points from 1988 to 2008, but none of that decline was due to declines in the effects of candidate quality.

Last, I examine how the effects of candidate quality on final election outcomes – i.e., the probability of winning – have changed over time. Because the probability that an election will flip due to quality effects depends on how competitive an election is, I focus on the competitiveness of elections in the sample, as previous work has noted a decline in the competitiveness of elections in the United States (Jacobson, 2015; Kustov et al., 2021). In the left panel of Figure 3, I plot the share of elections in each year that have a normal vote or “expected vote”<sup>15</sup> winning margin within a one standard deviation effect of candidate quality on vote shares (the “quality margin”), directly using the point estimates calculated in Figure 2.



Figure 3: Competitiveness and Effect of Quality on P(Win)

<sup>15</sup>The normal vote or expected vote is defined for statewide elections as the average of the Democratic two-party vote shares in presidential and other statewide office races in each decade; and for legislative elections, as the average Democratic two-party vote shares for all elections in that district, within a redistricting cycle.

While noisy, the proportion of elections where candidate quality is likely to make a difference floats slightly above 20% on average until 2010, where it plummets to less than 10% of elections. Following this trend, the right panel of [Figure 3](#) plots the estimated effects of quality differentials on the probability of winning over time. The magnitude of the estimated effects here track closely the share of elections within the quality margin in the left panel, particularly as the drop in competitiveness occurs after 2010. With the caveat that newspaper endorsement data is still being collected for elections in 2008-2022 and quality estimates may be somewhat more imprecise during this time frame, the suggestive evidence here reveals that candidate quality differences hardly ever change election outcomes anymore.

In summary, I find that the effects of candidate quality on vote shares follows a different trend than that of incumbency effects, and that while incumbency effects declined starting in the late 1980s, quality effects don’t decline until around 2010. I show that the effect of candidate quality on the ultimate election outcome – the probability of winning an election – has decreased dramatically over the past decade as well, and is close to zero today. The reason for this is twofold: first, elections after 2010 have become far less competitive,<sup>16</sup> so there are less opportunities for candidate quality to swing elections. Second, the effects of candidate quality on vote shares also decreased by more than 50% since it’s peak in 2010. The results here suggest that the importance of quality to voters has decreased recently, and also that the competitiveness of elections has declined so dramatically that the effects of candidate quality would change the outcome in very few elections today.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

This paper makes a number of major contributions to the literature on elections, voting, and polarization. First, the results of this paper speak to the vast literature in political science examining incumbency effects and their relation to candidate quality. By estimating

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<sup>16</sup>This may be due to redistricting. The evidence suggests that the 2010 redistricting cycle resulted in many “safe districts”, ones that were not competitive for either party, and overall benefiting Republican candidates ([Jacobson, 2015](#)). A similar “safe districts” gerrymandering seems to have occurred in the 2020 cycle as well

candidate quality effects directly using the measure from DeLuca (2023), I show that quality accounts for about one-third of incumbency effects, consistent with the few other studies that estimate this decomposition using completely different strategies in other contexts (Levitt and Wolfram, 1997; Ansolabehere et al., 2000; Hirano and Snyder, 2009). Additionally, I am able to show that incumbency only accounts for about one-fourth of the effects of candidate quality. The results demonstrate that while incumbency is a significant part of what makes candidates good, its effects alone are not enough to explain much of the variation in candidate quality and the increased electoral performance of high quality candidates.

Second, the estimates of the effects of candidate quality on vote shares directly speaks to the value of candidate quality to voters. Differences in quality affect voter decisions, and although polarization rises dramatically starting in the 1980s – see Figure 4 below – the magnitude of the quality effect has only declined in the past decade or so starting around 2010, contrary to standard predictions of vote choice models with valence attributes. This is a bit of a mystery, but there are a couple of potential explanation for this deviation from the traditional spatial model predictions. It could be that even as the political parties polarize (McCarty et al., 2016) and as voters sort into parties (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008), there is a mass of voters who remain either moderate or cross-pressured (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948), for whom candidate quality still makes a difference in their vote choice. If voters are not polarizing to the same extent as elites (Fiorina and Abrams, 2008; Fowler et al., 2023), then candidate quality could still make a difference to enough voters to significantly impact vote shares.

It could also be that even though polarization was increasing over this long time period according to standard DW-Nominate measures, voters may have an extremism “blind spot” (Bawn et al., 2012) where they don’t recognize or discern changes in ideological differences until they become quite large. For example, Figure 4 shows that the increase in polarization in the first 30 years of the graph (1954-1988) is about the same as the increase in polarization

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(Kenny et al., 2022). Because the full sample of elections used here include many non-districted offices (i.e., statewide elections), more work is needed to tease out how much of this decline in competitiveness is due to

in the next 20 years (1988-2008),<sup>17</sup> and then in just 6 years after 2008, polarization increases by the same increment yet again. Non-linearities or threshold effects in voters' ability to perceive and respond to polarization among elites could easily explain the delayed decline in the effects of candidate quality, while changes in media and technology might more easily explain the decline in (direct) incumbency effects. More research on this topic is needed to figure out the specifics of what is going on at the individual level and how voters are responding to increased polarization in an electoral context amid a rapidly changing news and media environment.

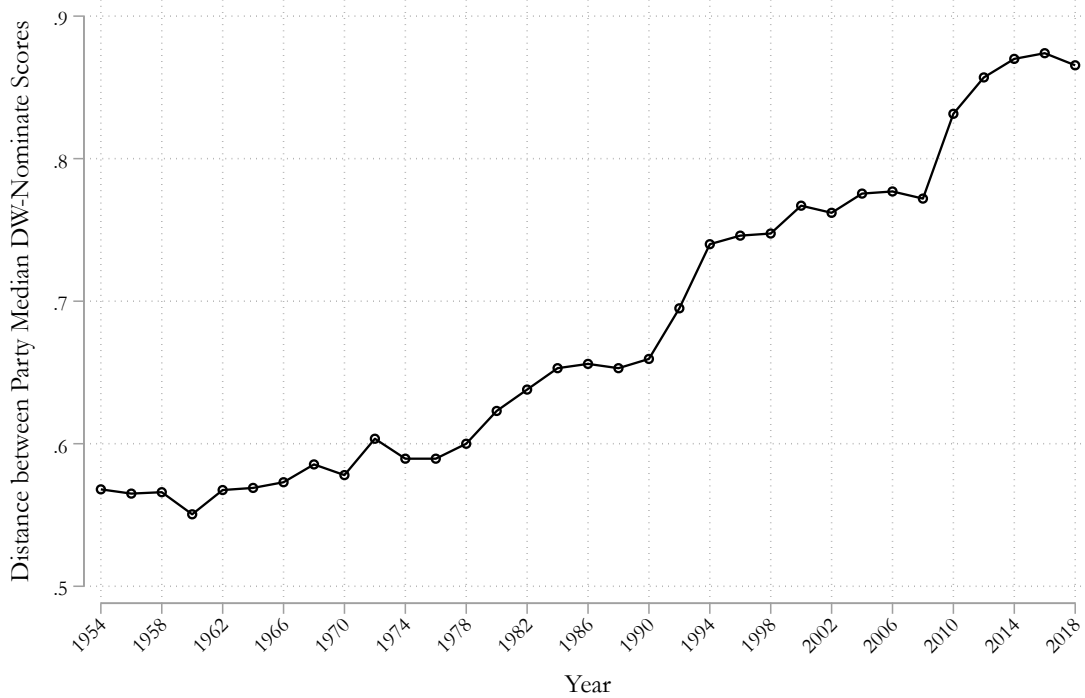


Figure 4: Party Polarization Over Time, 1954-2018

Third, this paper highlights the role that competitiveness plays in the selection process of high quality politicians: allowing voters to select candidates based on quality. I find that the share of elections where quality effects can plausibly make a difference in the final outcome has declined over time, consistent with trends documented in other work ([Abramowitz, 1991](#);

redistricting relative to other causes, such as continued geographic sorting and polarization.

<sup>17</sup>This is an increase of about 0.1 in the distance between the median DW-Nominate scores of each party



Abramowitz et al., 2006; Jacobson, 2015). This is consequential because it suggests that while polarization may be causing quality to matter less in the selection process, the dramatic decrease in electoral competition also is responsible for part of the reduction in the importance of quality in elections. Given that numerous scholars have pointed out potential benefits of political polarization (Snyder and Ting, 2002; Ahler and Broockman, 2018), it is possible that political scientists should worry less about polarization *per se* and worry more about electoral competition, if we think it is good for parties to compete on the dimension of candidate quality. Other political phenomena in recent decades – such as geographic sorting of partisans (Bishop, 2008; Brown and Enos, 2021) or drawing less competitive districts in redistricting (Friedman and Holden, 2009; Kenny et al., 2022) – are important culprits for why candidate quality seems to matter less.

The takeaway from the results of this paper is that the electoral process in the United States works quite well at selecting high quality candidates. Voters still value candidate quality, even in the contemporary polarized era, and in a majority of cases the higher quality candidate wins their election. High quality incumbents almost always win reelection, while incumbents who are lower quality than their challengers are much more likely to lose their elections. Across the time period analyzed, candidate quality makes up about one-third of incumbency effects, and incumbency status only accounts for a little more than one-quarter of quality effects, highlighting that the two phenomena, while related, are distinct.

However, the impact of candidate quality on electoral outcomes has been reduced quite dramatically over the past decade. Importantly, this trend is not only driven by changes in voter preferences, but also due to the steep decline in competitive elections. The results demonstrate the importance of competition in the electoral process, and suggest that the reduced effects of candidate quality on election results over time may be hindering voters' ability to select high quality candidates, overall reducing the incentive for political parties to run higher quality candidates in general elections and diminishing the quality of our political representatives.

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## A Robustness of Estimates

Here I present alternative specifications and provide robustness checks on the main results. In [Table A2](#), I use the CF-Score Extremity Adjusted measure from [DeLuca \(2023\)](#) to estimate the effects of quality on vote shares and on the probability of winning, and find a similar pattern of results as demonstrate in the main text [Table 2](#). In [Table A1](#), I demonstrate the effects of candidate quality differences on the probability of winning across office types, and show that, like in [Table 3](#), the effects are highest for statewide offices (including U.S. Senate elections) and lower for legislative elections for U.S. House members and state legislature.

Table A1: Effect of Quality on P(Win), by Office Type

VARIABLES	(1) US Senate	(2) Governor	(3) Other Statewide	(4) US House	(5) State Leg
Quality Differential	0.199*** (0.035)	0.149*** (0.043)	0.192*** (0.023)	0.054*** (0.013)	0.055** (0.026)
Incumbency	0.153*** (0.034)	-0.001 (0.044)	0.063** (0.026)	0.100*** (0.015)	0.074** (0.029)
Observations	423	336	370	1,556	388
Adjusted R-squared	0.526	0.334	0.521	0.787	0.743
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constituency FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes: Sample includes all elections in the endorsement data for which candidate quality differentials could be estimated and merged to election data, for years 1950-2022. Column 1 uses only elections for US Senate; column 2 uses only elections for Governor; column 3 uses all other statewide office elections; column 4 uses only elections for U.S. House; and column 5 uses only state legislative elections (in years 1967-2016). Outcome for each specification is a binary variable indicating a Democratic election victory (“P(D Win)”). The “Quality Differential” variable is coded so that negative quality differentials indicate that the Republican is higher quality while positive values indicate that the Democrat is higher quality, and is standardized to have a standard deviation of one. Incumbency is coded as +1 for a Democratic incumbent, -1 for a Republican incumbent, and 0 for open seats. \* =  $p < 0.10$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.01$ .

Table A2: Effect of Quality on Vote Shares, CF-Score Extremity-Adjusted Quality Measure

VARIABLES	(1) D Vote	(2) D Vote	(3) D Vote	(4) P(D Win)	(5) P(D Win)	(6) P(D Win)
Quality Differential	0.046*** (0.003)		0.029*** (0.003)	0.136*** (0.014)		0.088*** (0.015)
Incumbency		0.054*** (0.002)	0.049*** (0.003)		0.192*** (0.010)	0.137*** (0.018)
Observations	1,105	3,185	1,105	1,105	3,185	1,105
Adjusted R-squared	0.820	0.799	0.862	0.702	0.577	0.725
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constituency FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes: Sample includes contested elections for President, Governor, U.S. Senate, U.S. House, and single-member State Legislative elections (1967-2016), and select other statewide offices, in years 1950-2022. All specifications use the CF-Score adjusted quality differential as the “Quality Differential” Measure, as defined in DeLuca (2023). Outcome variable is the Democratic two-party vote share in the election (“D Vote”). The “Quality Differential” variable is coded so that negative quality differentials indicate that the Republican is higher quality while positive values indicate that the Democrat is higher quality, and is standardized to have a standard deviation of one. Incumbency is coded as +1 for a Democratic incumbent, -1 for a Republican incumbent, and 0 for open seats. \* =  $p < 0.10$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.01$ .