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Abstract

Congressional elections have occurred every 2 years since the nation's founding, yet we know surprisingly little about these electoral contests outside of the modern era. This is unfortunate as our understanding of how Congress performs and has evolved over time is directly linked to how its elected representatives reach and maintain office. In an effort to better understand early U.S. House elections, we revisit the era of the “partisan press” where newspapers were the main source of news for American voters and were typically operated by one of the two major parties. Using a data set linking the geographic location of partisan newspapers with electoral data during the early 19th century, we examine district-specific factors impacting the competitiveness of House races. We uncover previously unidentified evidence of candidate-specific effects during this historical era along with confirmation of media influence in the context of early American elections.

Keywords

congressional elections, partisan press, Antebellum Era

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In the last two decades, an increasing number of political scientists have begun looking to the past in an effort to learn more about aspects of congressional history and gain leverage on important research questions. What makes this particular trend so noteworthy is that the bulk of research on Congress to date has focused almost exclusively on the contemporary era. This is especially true in the context of research examining congressional elections. Although we know a great deal about congressional elections that have occurred since the end of World War II, less attention has been given to elections prior to the mid-1900s where elections data are not readily available. As a result, much of our knowledge about earlier elections is based almost entirely on anecdotal or historical accounts from these eras. An unfortunate consequence of this emphasis is that we often assume that congressional elections from the past are far different from those in the modern era simply because the historical context is so dissimilar to what we know today.

As is often the case, new research has begun to challenge many of our existing beliefs about earlier congressional elections, especially in terms of how well modern theories hold up across time. Engstrom and Kernell (2005), for instance, find that ballot structure and redistricting efforts played an important role in influencing electoral outcomes in House races over time. In their analysis of elections in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Carson and Roberts (2013) find that experienced candidates exhibit behavior that is remarkably similar to candidates in the contemporary era. They also find that electoral reforms such as the Australian ballot and the direct primary served to alter the incentive structure for members of Congress and reduced levels of electoral competition over time. Finally, their results offer evidence of an incumbency effect as early as the late 19th century, which casts doubt on contemporary explanations for the emergence and growth of the incumbency advantage over time.¹

Recent years have witnessed a greater interest in congressional elections outside of the modern era as the preceding examples suggest. Yet, with few exceptions, almost nothing is known about congressional elections during the early antebellum era. This is unfortunate as our understanding of how the institution of Congress performs and has evolved over time is explicitly linked to how its elected representatives attain and hold office. We believe that a closer examination of elections during this era could offer us novel insights about how the newly developed institution chose to organize itself and create public policies for the nation. In many respects, this is a truly unique political era as political parties during the first two decades of 19th century were relatively weak compared with the party organizations that would emerge in the coming years. Indeed, it was the newspapers of this era that played an active role in keeping the early parties afloat, which should

have observable and systematic consequences for how individual candidates were elected to office.

In an effort to shed light on these early elections, we revisit the era of the “partisan press” during the first two decades of the 19th century when newspapers were operated almost exclusively by the two major party organizations and were the primary source of political news for American voters.² In particular, we examine a number of district-specific factors that could affect the competitiveness of House races. We also investigate whether the geographic location of partisan newspapers influenced election outcomes. Our overriding goal is to better understand how candidates were selected to run for office during this era as well as examine the effects that experienced candidates and newspapers had on congressional elections during the early 1800s.

The organization of this article is as follows. In the next section, we examine the politics of congressional elections during the early part of the 19th century as well as evaluate the geographic connection between partisan newspapers and election outcomes throughout this era. From there, we briefly discuss the history of the partisan press in America, especially in terms of its linkage to the major party organizations of the day. We then review the data and measures used in our analysis before shifting the discussion to our results. In the concluding section of the article, we discuss the implications of our findings regarding elections in the antebellum era and explore possible extensions in future work.

Congressional Elections in the Early 19th Century

Little systematic attention has been given to congressional elections in the early part of the 19th century. Much of the recent work on 19th century elections has focused on the second half of the 1800s (see Carson & Roberts, 2005; Engstrom, 2006), with almost no attention given to congressional elections prior to 1850. Indeed, the emphasis in the literature has largely been on U.S. House races in the post-World War II era. On one level, this should not come as a surprise. Until recently, historical data on elections throughout the 19th century were not readily available in machine-readable form and there was little reason to think that analyses with existing data would yield new or interesting results. The received wisdom concerning elections from this period was that candidate-specific factors would not be especially salient in a largely party-centered era (Jacobson, 1989). Because parties directly controlled nominations, mobilized voters, and decided the format of the ballot used at various polling places, one might assume that there was little room left for candidate behavior or partisan newspapers to exert an independent influence on voter decision making.

In many respects, elections held in the early decades of the 1800s were very different affairs from what we are accustomed to today. As Kernell (1977) explains, "Our image of congressional elections during this period is one of fiercely combative affairs which by modern standards produced intense voter interest, large turnout, and close elections" (p. 672). Unlike the modern era, relatively few legislators during this period viewed service in the U.S. House as a long-term career. Following the norm or practice of "rotation" in office, most legislators would serve one or two terms in the House before exiting the chamber (Kernell, 1977; Struble, 1979). Thus, it was not uncommon for each election cycle during this period to dramatically reconstitute the membership of Congress (Polsby, 1968). In the words of one historian writing about this era of politics, "For the first four decades of national government between one third and two thirds of the congressional community left every two years not to return" (Young, 1966, p. 89).

Candidate recruitment practices in the early 19th century were starkly different as well. In contrast to the familiar candidate-centered era of politics today, political parties played a more influential role in terms of elections held during this era (Aldrich, 1995; Jacobson, 2013). Indeed, prior to the emergence of primaries in the early 20th century, House candidates were chosen exclusively by party caucuses in the 1900s (Dallinger, 1897; Ostrogorski, 1964). These caucuses were typically dominated by loose coalitions of state and local parties, who attempted to recruit candidates that were both loyal to the party's cause and able to enlist other followers for the party (Swenson, 1982). Given that congressional districts typically represented a number of distinct communities with disparate interests, the nominating process was often arduous and cumbersome. "With few political organizations extending beyond their local towns and counties, district nominating caucuses were pluralistic, frequently fragmented affairs with each local organization sponsoring its own candidate" (Kernell, 1977, p. 675).

Another major difference in the conduct of elections during this era involved the norms associated with political campaigning. Unlike the seemingly endless campaigning by candidates in the months preceding the November election in the modern era, candidates for elective office in the 19th century behaved very differently and relied more extensively on external outlets to convey their messages to potential voters. Political norms of the day forbade candidates from campaigning on their own behalf (Bensel, 2004). Instead, "newspapers conducted many if not most of the opinion-shaping activities we now call campaigning: communicating a party's message, promoting its candidates, attacking their opponents, and encouraging voters to turn out at the polls" (Pasley, 2001, p. 4). Given the intensely partisan nature of newspaper politics during this era, it is not surprising that the

rhetoric exchanged by the party newspapers on behalf of the candidates could be described as heated, acerbic, or even vitriolic at times.³

In light of the obvious differences between contemporary elections and those during the early 19th century, are there specific reasons we might expect candidate-specific factors as reflected in the newspapers of the day to directly affect elections during this era? Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that these types of effects may be present as far back as the early 1800s. First, previous research has found support for an electoral connection between legislators and their constituents similar to that described by Mayhew (1974) at various points throughout the 19th century. Bianco, Spence, and Wilkerson (1996), for instance, find strong evidence of an electoral connection as early as 1816 in the context of House consideration of a congressional pay raise. In addition, Carson and Engstrom (2005) find that incumbents who voted for John Quincy Adams in the disputed 1824 presidential election, but came from districts that had supported Andrew Jackson, were more likely to suffer at the polls in the 1826-1827 midterm congressional elections.

Second, newspapers during this era played a critical role in informing citizens about important issues of the day including upcoming elections and the candidates running under the party banner. The reach of the party press was extensive in the 19th century (Smith, 1977), and events in Congress, including elections, were covered in great detail (Kernell, 1986; Kernell & Jacobson, 1987). As Kernell and Jacobson (1987) have shown, Congress typically received a greater degree of day-to-day coverage in newspapers than the president during most of the 19th century. Moreover, there is little doubt that citizens were regularly exposed to these partisan news outlets as evidenced by research on 19th century newspapers. According to Pasley (2001),

Neighbors often shared newspapers with each other, or even subscribed jointly . . . In a time when most people were still conducting most of their daily affairs through face-to-face exchanges, even a few newspaper subscribers were enough to spread the word to entire neighborhoods. (pp. 7-8)

Candidates who were selected by the local and state parties often played a pivotal role in terms of influencing the outcome of the elections as well. Indeed, the most important of these was the ability to marshal votes for the party ticket given the relative weakness of parties during this era. Skilled, well-known candidates could enhance the attractiveness of the overall ticket for prospective voters, especially given the absence of presidential candidates on the campaign trail. In an era characterized by torchlight parades and door-to-door canvassing, skilled campaigners were necessary for rallying the party

faithful and rousing orators could help mobilize voters to win close elections. Indeed, the real danger to party fortunes was that loyal partisans would stay home and not vote. Of course, this begs the question—did voters respond to such efforts on the part of candidates? While many of the historical accounts of voting behavior in this era paint a somewhat bleak picture, Aldrich (1995) offers a considerably more optimistic perspective:

Costs of voting in early nineteenth-century America, as in the twentieth century, were not overwhelming for many. To be sure, distance to the polls, transportation costs, and even the lack of free time to devote to voting were greater obstacles then than now for many. Lower literacy rates made becoming informed more difficult. Still, the costs were not that high for a great proportion of the electorate, and party organizations could offset enough of them to help make participation worthwhile. Perhaps most important were speechmaking, rallies, bonfires, and the like that provided information about the election, the contenders, and the stakes involved, lowering decision costs. (p. 101)

Finally, there is a well-established literature demonstrating that incumbent politicians in the 19th century were selective in their decisions to run or retire from Congress (see Aldrich, 1995; Brady, Buckley, & Rivers, 1999; Fiorina, Rohde, & Wissel, 1975; Kernell, 1977; Price, 1975). While this literature has consistently found 19th century incumbents respond rationally to changes in their incentive structure when deciding to remain in Congress, there has been comparatively less work on the role of challengers during this period.⁴ Given that the contemporary congressional elections literature (Jacobson, 1989; Jacobson & Kernell, 1983) has consistently found that it almost always takes a strong challenger to unseat an incumbent, a number of questions emerge. Is the impact of experienced challengers on House races a modern phenomenon or is it a pattern that can be found more generally throughout American political history? What effects did the partisan press have on congressional elections during the early part of the 19th century? To provide the necessary context for answering these important questions, we first examine the role of the partisan press during the early antebellum era.

The Partisan Press in the Antebellum Era

While most modern mainstream media outlets attempt to at least appear *neutral* and *non-partisan*, this was in no way the case during the early Republic period. In fact, while not all newspapers were linked to a particular political party, the majority during the 1800-1820 era were associated directly with either the Federalist or Republican Parties.⁵ The economic realities of the

early 19th century made it difficult for newspapers to stay afloat financially without the aid and sponsorship of political parties. Moreover, during the early decades of the 19th century, print media was the primary source of political communication available for mass audiences. Among the various printed items, newspapers—comparatively cheap to produce—dominated (Pasley, 2001). In *The Tyranny of the Printers*, one of the most comprehensive accounts of newspaper politics in the early Republic, Pasley (2001) paints a picture of the pivotal political role newspapers played during early American history:

In nineteenth-century America . . . the newspaper press was the political system's central institution, not simply a forum or atmosphere in which politics took place. Instead, newspapers and their editors were purposeful actors in the political process, linking parties, voters, and the government together, and pursuing specific political goals. Newspapers were the "linchpin" of nineteenth-century party politics . . . This state of affairs held with particular force nationally from the 1790s to 1860s, but it remained strong long after the Civil War. (pp. 3-4)

Newspapers in the early 19th century had a near lock on political communication and it was the embryonic party organizations of the era that contributed to the political message. In this manner, newspapers and parties were integrally tied together in a manner not seen today. In fact, newspapers actually carried out many of the functions relegated to more established political party organizations in later decades including voter mobilization, platform/policy dissemination, and candidate advertising. As Sloan (1982) argues, the newspaper editors during this era played a similar role to the party bosses of the late 19th century.⁶ In discussing this "symbiotic" relationship, Pasley (2001) maintains that

Newspapers filled many of the gaps left by the party system's uneven development, providing a fabric that held the parties together between elections and conventions, connected voters and activists to the larger party, and linked the different political levels and geographic regions of the country. (p. 11)

Newspapers also found themselves in a privileged economic situation, enjoying a close relationship with postmasters and the postal service. In effect, postmasters were responsible for establishing many newspapers during this period of time (Kielbowicz, 1983). Early policies formulated by Congress, including subsidized postal rates, were designed to boost newspaper circulation and, in turn, provide support for the new American government dominated by the Federalists. There is little doubt that such measures

had a substantial impact on circulation rates for these early newspapers. Kielbowicz (1983) indicates, "An estimated 1.8 million newspapers and 1.9 million letters were mailed in 1799. Both newspaper and letter postage, as well as the number of pieces mailed, grew about 270 percent between 1799 and 1814" (p. 270).

These policies also had the unintended consequence of benefiting the opposition press and, later, the opposition Republican Party. As Pasley (2001) explains,

Such geographic linkage was facilitated by heavily subsidized postal rates for newspapers (including the privilege of exchanging newspapers between publishers for free). The early Congresses established these policies (many of which were based on preexisting customs) in the hope that extensive newspaper circulation would help maintain public support for the new government. But the newspaper subsidies quite inadvertently fostered the development of first an opposition movement and then an opposition political party of national scope. (p. 8)

Along these lines, Kielbowicz (1983) also reports that Republicans supported subsidized postage rates for newspapers as a means to facilitate the dissemination of their opposition message to constituents.

The overt connection between newspapers in the early 19th century and the rapidly developing political parties coupled with the fact that newspapers were also the only major form of political communication for American citizens creates an ideal situation to test the effects of partisan communication on vote choice in antebellum congressional elections. As eligible voters were only able to vote for members of the U.S. House (as opposed to the Senate) during this era, our analysis will examine what effects, if any, the presence of partisan news papers produced on these elections.⁷ In addition, we hope to better understand whether candidate-specific effects influenced election outcomes in an era when local and state parties were largely responsible for recruiting individuals to run for elective office.

Data and Methods

As noted above, we are interested in whether district-specific factors such as candidate quality and the presence of one or more partisan newspapers directly affected the outcome of congressional elections during the early antebellum era. To examine this systematically, we rely on a methodology that can simultaneously take into account the temporal and cross-sectional variation present in our data set. For this project, House races occurring from 1800 through 1820 serve as the unit of analysis. The dependent variable,

Federalist Vote_{it}, is the share of the vote by House election won by the Federalist candidate.⁸ Parameter estimates are generated using ordinary least squares (OLS), and we control for autocorrelation via the inclusion of a lagged dependent variable, *Federalist Vote_{it-1}*, in the model. In addition to the methodological concern mentioned, including a lagged measure of the Federalist vote share also helps to establish a baseline measure of partisan support in each congressional district in an era where alternative measures (i.e., presidential vote) are not available.⁹ The issue of heteroskedasticity is addressed via the use of robust standard errors.¹⁰

As with any project of this nature, one of the biggest challenges we faced was the need to track down a considerable amount of historical elections data. Our search was largely facilitated by Dubin's (1998) *United States Congressional Elections, 1788-1997*, the most comprehensive source for electoral data over time. Using this invaluable source of candidate information, we were able to collect relevant information on the names of the incumbent and related challengers, the vote totals on which percentages of the two-party vote were computed, as well as the partisan affiliation for each candidate. Moreover, the latter was supplemented with information from Martis' *The Historical Atlas of Political Parties in the United States, 1789-1989* to fill in gaps in party identification.¹¹

Given our interest in examining the impact of candidate quality on incumbent electoral performance, it was also necessary to collect data on candidates' political backgrounds. Not surprisingly, the coding and collection of such data proved far less straightforward. Throughout our analysis, we measure candidate quality as whether a candidate currently holds or has previously held elective office. Although other more nuanced measures exist, we chose not to use them for two specific reasons. First, and most importantly, almost all prior studies have demonstrated that the simple dichotomy performs as well as more sophisticated measures in other studies of challenger quality (Jacobson, 2013); thus, the dichotomous measure gives us a more parsimonious model without suffering any substantive loss. Second, it would be extremely difficult to construct a scale measure that would compare the "quality" of previous offices held in this time period. That is, although the simple dichotomy is a blunt measure and may indeed be an imprecise measure of candidate quality, we think that constructing a more nuanced measure for this time period may increase measurement error for some offices, while providing very little additional precision in other cases.

To track down as much data on candidates' backgrounds as possible, we had to search a number of archives and online sources. Our first strategy was to systematically search through the online *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774 to Present*.¹² The *Directory* is a comprehensive source

Table 1. Proportion of Quality Candidates Running by Party and Election Year.

Election year	% of Federalist quality candidates	Total	% of Republican quality candidates	Total
1800	70.2	80	66.7	76
1802	51.8	58	74.1	83
1804	51.0	75	76.9	113
1806	37.2	55	79.7	118
1808	38.5	57	80.4	119
1810	50.6	78	73.4	113
1812	39.7	58	69.2	101
1814	40.9	81	68.7	136
1816	46.2	90	67.7	132
1818	37.9	74	72.3	141
1820	28.1	56	81.9	163

Source. Data collected by authors.

providing a detailed career history for every legislator who has ever been elected to Congress. Given the enormous amount of legislative turnover during this era, this resource allowed us to obtain background information on candidates who defeated congressional incumbents as well as candidates who served prior to, or after, the specific election in question. We supplemented this data with information found on “The Political Graveyard’s” website,¹³ which often provides extensive background information on politicians from the 19th and 20th centuries (in addition to where they are buried). Additional background information was collected from the *New York Times* Historical Index and *Google*TM.¹⁴

Data on candidate quality by political party and election cycle are presented in Table 1. For the Federalist Party, the prevalent trend is a decline in experienced candidates over time with the proportion of candidates with prior political experience slipping from a high of 70% in 1800 to a low of 28% by 1820. This pattern tracks closely and, indeed, may be causally linked to the decline and eventual disappearance of the Federalist Party from the political scene. Conversely, during this same 20-year period, the Republicans consistently fielded higher percentages of experienced candidates, with the percentage peaking at 82% during the 1820 election cycle.

To examine the effect of partisan newspapers on early congressional elections, we rely on data collected by historian Jeffrey Pasley (2001). For this research, Pasley compiled a database of 1,067 newspapers during the early Republic that included the name of the paper, the city and state/territory in

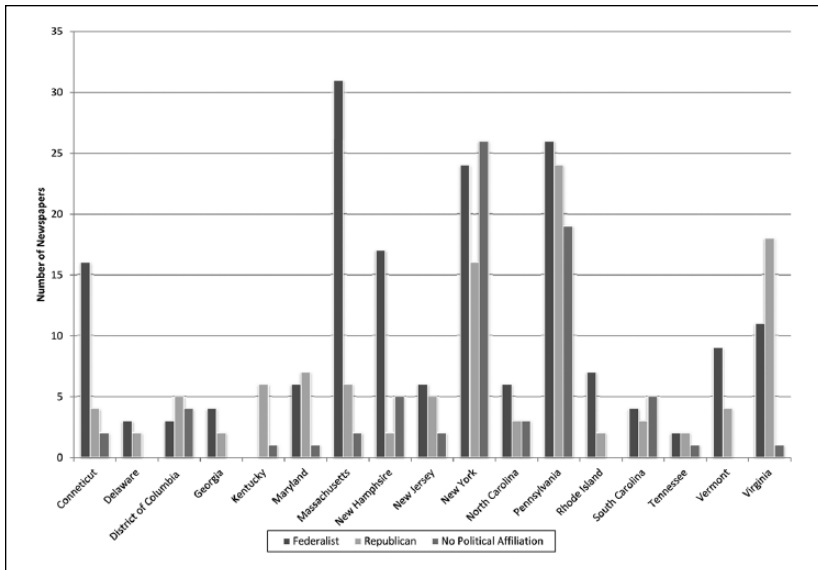


Figure 1. Newspaper distribution by state and type, 1800.

which the paper was located, the year in which the paper was founded and in which it folded (if applicable), and the partisan affiliation of the paper coded as Federalist, Republican, or no partisan affiliation.¹⁵ In addition to his own primary research in categorizing the partisan leanings of these newspapers, Pasley also relied on a number of other published sources that included surveys of newspapers from this period of time. Pasley states that his newspaper database is a *conservative* estimate of the size of the partisan press during this period of time given problems associated with data availability.¹⁶

Figures 1 to 3 plot the distribution of newspapers by type across states (and the District of Columbia) during 1800, 1810, and 1820, respectively. Looking at these figures, one can note a great deal of variation between and within states across time. In 1800, New York contained the highest number of Federalist papers at 31, while the highest number of Republican papers (24) were located in Pennsylvania. Ten years later, New York still led all other states in the number of Federalist papers with 28, but Republican papers actually outnumbered their partisan rival, growing from 16 in 1800 to 31 in 1810. By 1820, the number of partisan newspapers had declined across all states. Nevertheless, the drop in the number of Federalist papers is even more pronounced compared with those in the Republican camp with fewer than 20 newspapers in New York and Pennsylvania, respectively.

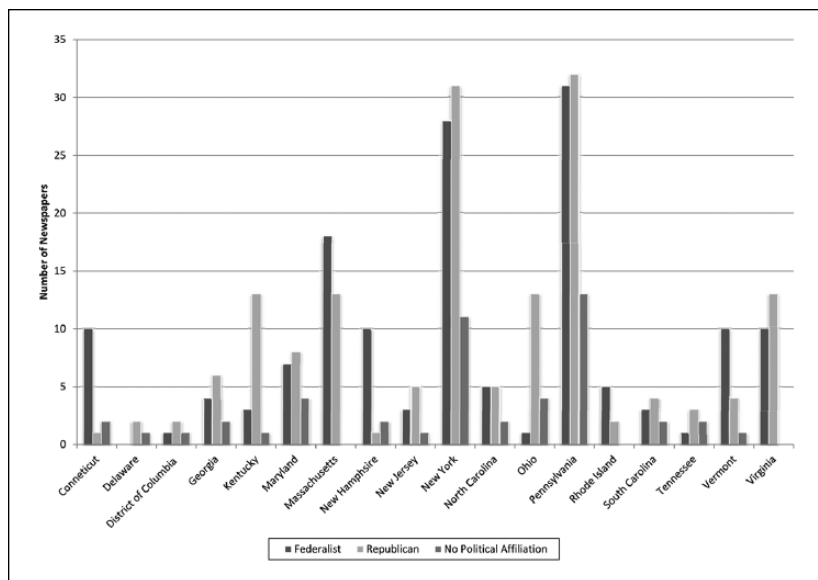


Figure 2. Newspaper distribution by state and type, 1810.

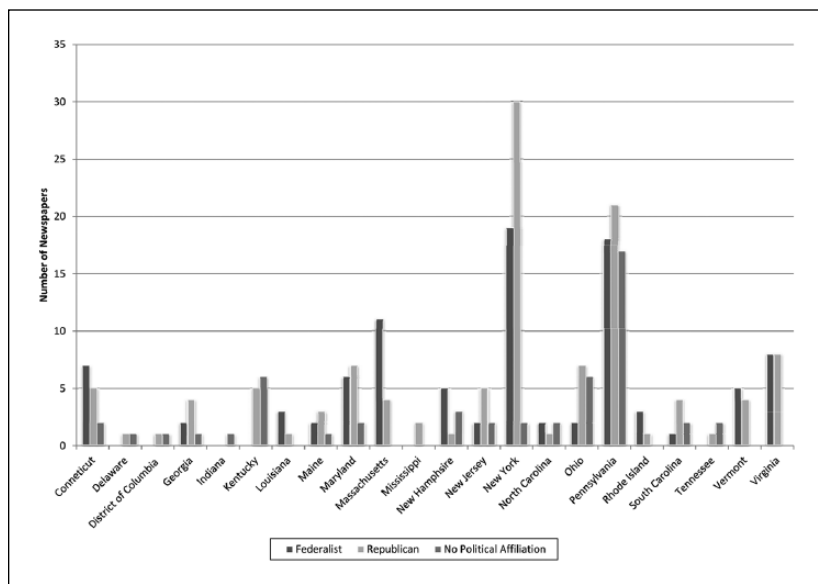


Figure 3. Newspaper distribution by state, 1820.

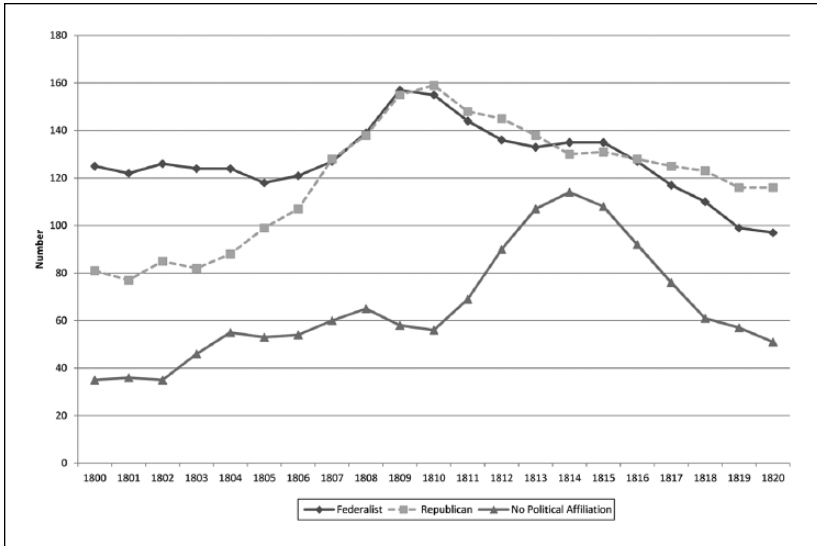


Figure 4. U.S. newspapers by type, 1800-1820.

Figure 4 plots the total number of newspapers by type from 1800 through 1820. From this figure, the dominance of the partisan presence is evident as the total numbers of Federalist and Republican papers outstrip those of newspapers with no partisan affiliation during the 1800 to 1820 period. Another prominent trend present in these time series shows the initial gap in the numbers of Federalist and Republican papers in 1800 and the subsequent surge in the number of Republican papers to close the gap completely by 1807. In the next few years, the number of Federalist and Republican newspapers closely track with one another, peaking in 1810 and declining in the decade thereafter. The number of non-partisan papers shows a later peak in 1814 with an even steeper rate of decline in the following 5 years.

To place these newspapers within their corresponding congressional district, we assigned each paper to its respective historical county or counties (if changes occurred to county boundaries during the 1800-1820 time period). Using geographic boundary information for congressional districts gathered by Parsons, Beach, and Hermann (1978) for this era, it was then possible to assign the county in which each newspaper was located to the corresponding district boundary for the 20-year time frame of our study. Once each newspaper was spatially and temporally plotted, we created two independent variables to be used in our analysis of House elections. More specifically, *Federalist Paper in District* and *Republican Paper in District* are count

variables that measure the total number of Federalist and Republican papers, respectively, contained within the boundaries of each district for elections in the sample that we examine.¹⁷

In addition to the preceding covariates, we also control for whether an incumbent did not seek reelection to the subsequent Congress (*open seat*). Including this variable in our analysis allows us to determine if open seats were more competitive for Federalist candidates as one might expect. Given the period we are analyzing, we are unable to directly control for a number of substantive factors that may be related to specific election cycles such as the occurrence of national partisan tides. To control for the presence of temporal effects, we include a set of $n - 1$ election-cycle dummy variables where the 1800 election is utilized as the excluded comparison category.¹⁸

Results

The results of our three regression models are presented below in Table 2. Most notably, the presence of a quality Republican candidate in a race has a decisive and negative impact on the vote share of the Federalist candidate.¹⁹ The magnitude of this effect, at roughly 5%, is by far the largest substantive effect of any of the variables included in our models. This finding is informative and counter-intuitive in terms of the manner in which political scientists have typically viewed congressional elections from this era. Jacobson (1989), for instance, argues that candidate quality should be of little consequence throughout the 19th century when party organizations were principally in control of candidate selection mechanisms. Nevertheless, our results suggest that the experience of the candidates running for office was an important factor in how individuals voted, contrary to conventional wisdom about how congressional elections were viewed during this era (but see Carson & Engstrom, 2005).

In terms of the electoral effects of the partisan newspapers, the results in Table 2 also indicate that *Federalist Newspaper* and *Republican Newspaper* are statistically significant and signed in the hypothesized direction in all three models. Again, these indicators are count variables measuring the number of each type of newspaper present within the district. For each additional Federalist newspaper within a district, the model predicts the share of the Federalist vote to increase by roughly 1%. Any gains in Federalist vote share from the presence of a Federalist-leaning newspaper are more than offset, however, by the establishment of a paper connected to the Republican cause which the model predicts will diminish the Federalist vote share by approximately 1.1% to 1.3%. Although modest in scope, one should remember that most elections during this era were highly competitive, which means such

Table 2. Congressional Election Results, 1800-1820.

Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2
Federalist vote share _(t-1)	0.590** (0.025)	0.608** (0.026)
Republican candidate quality	-5.091** (1.457)	-4.762** (1.409)
Federalist paper in district	1.070** (0.317)	1.172** (0.320)
Republican paper in district	-1.093** (0.485)	-1.355** (0.467)
Open seat	-2.326* (0.279)	-1.744 (1.241)
Constant	16.792** (1.807)	12.825** (3.044)
1802		-3.015 (3.307)
1804		-3.214 (2.854)
1806		4.175 (3.068)
1808		14.287** (2.868)
1810		0.022 (2.930)
1812		12.944** (3.011)
1814		8.958** (2.662)
1816		-0.101 (2.706)
1818		-6.483** (3.122)
1820		6.254** (3.032)
N	1,450	1,450
R ²	.44	.48

Note. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the Federalist vote share in the current election (t).

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$.

effects would be more pronounced in hotly contested races. Moreover, these effects may be somewhat conservative due to potential data limitations during this era. Nevertheless, our election outcome models do lend credible support to the notion that voters appear to be responding to cues in the form of partisan information conveyed by newspapers of the day.

While the open seat variable is significant and signed in a negative direction in Model 1, it just misses statistical significance at conventional levels when we control for election-specific effects in Model 2. Not surprisingly, the lagged share of the Federalist vote from the preceding election cycle was also a fairly strong predictor of the vote share for the Federalist candidate in the current election across all three models. The model predicts that for every percentage point of the vote earned by the Federalist Party in the previous House election, one can expect to see approximately a 0.6 point return in the current election cycle. Perhaps even more interesting is that the estimates for the primary covariates across the two models are remarkably robust to alternative specifications such as election-specific effects. Finally, it should be

noted that the relatively parsimonious models explain close to 50% of the variance in the Federalist share of the two-party vote, which is encouraging given the considerable data constraints associated with studying historical political eras.

In our analysis up to this point, we have simply assumed that the relationship between the location of partisan newspapers and election returns was unidirectional (i.e., the presence of a newspaper within a given congressional district would impact election outcomes). However, what are the potential consequences for our statistical inferences if this simple assumption is not correct? One immediate concern would be endogeneity, which could potentially bias the inferences reported in Table 2 and call our substantive conclusions into question. To assess the severity of any potential endogeneity in our estimates, we need to systematically investigate this issue further.

If we think about the presence of a partisan newspaper as a potential “treatment effect,” then we need to evaluate whether the treatment is randomly assigned in our data. Unfortunately, the answer may be no given that newspapers are most likely to emerge where they have the best chance of selling. For instance, the presence of a large number of Federalists in a given area could mean higher vote shares for Federalist candidates, but could also signify a larger number of Federalist papers present in the corresponding congressional district(s). To investigate this further, we need the equivalent of a random assignment to identify the treatment effect of the partisan newspapers. As natural experiments are out of the question for this era, we turn to a variety of potential statistical “fixes” to address this potential concern.

One possible solution to deal with the potential endogeneity issue is to find one or more instrumental variables that we can use in place of the endogenous regressor in the context of a two stage least square (2SLS) model. Unfortunately, using this estimation strategy is not without its limitations. As is widely known, data constraints can often make it difficult to identify an instrumental variable that is correlated with the endogenous regressor, but is not correlated with the error term. In this context, that problem is especially profound given significant data limitations associated with the antebellum era. What is less clear, however, are the various pitfalls associated with using instrumental variable strategies that involve the use of “weak” instruments—those that are only weakly correlated with the endogenous variable. Although including endogenous regressors can lead to inconsistent OLS parameter estimates, Hahn and Hausman (2003) maintain that weak instruments produce instrument variable (IV) estimators that tend asymptotically toward their inconsistent OLS counterparts and restrict accurate inferences. In other words, selecting instruments that are only weakly correlated with the

potentially endogenous regressors can lead to results that are actually worse than simply ignoring the endogeneity in the first place.

In light of the paucity of potential instruments available during this era and the serious statistical limitations associated with using weak instruments, we realized that an alternative estimation strategy would be necessary. In this vein, we elected to use a recently developed approach, the latent instrumental variable (LIV) method, where the instruments are unobserved and are estimated from the data itself. This technique, first utilized by Peter Ebbes, utilizes a discrete latent variable model that accounts for dependencies between regressors and the error term. In light of this, observed exogenous instrumental models are not necessary for estimation. This, in turn, makes it unnecessary to find one or more instruments to replace the endogenous regressor. To further validate this approach, Ebbes has tested the LIV method on simulated data and empirical applications and found that the LIV approach is always superior to OLS estimates.²⁰

As noted above, the advantage of using the LIV technique is that it does not require us to identify one or more exogenous instruments to use in place of the endogenous regressors. That being said, the technique is a bit more computationally intensive than OLS or 2SLS and requires the use of a Bayesian estimation technique. We estimated the model originally reported in Table 2 with and without election-cycle fixed effects using the LIV method in WinBUGS. Our results (after 50,000 iterations) are displayed in Table 3. Although the LIV results are not directly comparable with the OLS results in Table 2, they are quite similar in terms of sign and significance. The one main exception is that Republican paper in the district is not “significant” in the traditional sense. However, the model does strongly suggest that this variable would be negative a vast majority of the time as we would theoretically expect. Based on this estimation technique, there is modest evidence of endogeneity for this variable, but it appears to be marginal in terms of its statistical effect on the other variables included in our equation. Accordingly, we have greater confidence in the accuracy of the other reported effects—especially the negative effect of Republican candidate quality on Federalist vote share.

The latent instrumental variable approach is a more conservative estimator in comparison with an instrumental variable estimation technique. That is, the latent instrument is a random effect that controls for the effects of any omitted variables that may be leading to endogeneity. This random effect produces a latent instrument that will almost certainly explain more variance in the outcome variable than any observed instrument would as it is a function of several unobserved variables. In light of this, it is unsurprising that the magnitude of the effects of our substantive variables of interest is somewhat

Table 3. Latent Instrumental Variable Analysis, 1800-1820.

Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2
Federalist vote share _(t-1)	0.633* (0.023)	0.638* (0.023)
Republican candidate quality	-2.216* (1.245)	-2.356* (1.248)
Federalist paper in district	0.972* (0.356)	1.045* (0.339)
Republican paper in district	-0.120 (0.630)	-0.567 (0.595)
Open seat	-1.593* (1.172)	-1.275 (1.167)
Constant	11.31* (1.6)	10.43* (1.767)
1802		-2.903 (1.99)
1804		-3.40* (1.794)
1806		2.066 (1.918)
1808		9.19* (1.882)
1810		-1.229 (1.792)
1812		8.391* (1.841)
1814		5.719* (1.698)
1816		-1.235 (1.683)
1818		-6.161* (1.694)
1820		3.947* (1.662)
N	1,450	1,450

Note. Entries are means of the posterior with standard deviations in parentheses. The dependent variable is the Federalist vote share in the current election (t).

* $p < .05$.

smaller than our original estimates. Nevertheless, our key independent variable, Republican candidate quality, remains both negative and significant in the context of this more conservative estimator.

Discussion

In this article, we have examined the effect of district-specific factors and examined the role that partisan newspapers played in influencing elections during the first two decades of the 19th century. As we noted at the outset of the article, political parties during the early 19th century were relatively weak compared with the party organizations that would emerge in the ensuing decades. According to some historical accounts, it was the newspapers of this era that were keeping the parties afloat, not the other way round. Based on our findings, it appears that the emergent parties of this era relied extensively on newspapers because they had to in order to survive. In addition, it would seem that these newspapers solved many of the collective action problems that the later, stronger party organizations would be able to address.

In particular, they played a very important role in informing voters about individual candidates, their platforms, and the importance of participating in the electoral contests.

Among the various results reported in the article, the most notable is probably the effect of candidate quality on election outcomes during the early 1800s. In contrast to what conventional wisdom might lead us to expect, we found that the presence of an experienced Republican challenger had a substantial, negative effect on Federalist vote margins in the antebellum era. Indeed, the effect of challenger quality was approximately three to four times as great as some of the other variables in our analysis. While other studies have begun to uncover evidence of candidate quality effects in the latter part of the 19th century (see Carson & Roberts, 2005, 2013), to our knowledge, this is the earliest such example of candidate quality effects in the context of American congressional elections. This finding, in itself, raises additional questions in terms of understanding elections from this era that should be more fully addressed in future work—especially in terms of how and why voters responded to candidate-level characteristics.

In addition to the effects for candidate quality, we also found evidence that newspapers played an active role in antebellum elections. At first glance, the effects of partisan newspapers on election outcomes during this era appear relatively modest. For each newspaper within a district, candidate vote share was either helped or hindered by only about 1%. While this effect may seem small by modern standards, one needs to consider how competitive and hotly contested congressional elections from this period actually were. More than half of the congressional races during the 1800-1820 era were decided by ten percentage points or less, which meant legislators had far less margin of error in terms of their electoral fortunes than their modern counterparts. Furthermore, congressional districts with multiple partisan newspapers made it increasingly difficult for opposing party candidates to win elections as they would presumably have a harder time getting their message out to the eligible voters.

Overall, our results have important implications for students of congressional politics and history. Given the candidate quality effects we find, it appears as though the conventional view of antebellum elections is, at the very least, inaccurate and misleading. Clearly, individual-level experience was an important factor in terms of influencing election outcomes. Examining the underlying mechanism at work here would seem to be of significant importance in work seeking to build on our results. Moreover, it appears as though the partisan newspapers of the day played an important role in terms of educating voters about candidates and motivating citizens to go the polls. Thus, our results call into question the view that the Federalist and Jeffersonian Republicans were primarily “parties-in-government,” with

little or no emphasis placed on winning elections (Aldrich, 1995, pp. 94-95). If this were indeed the case, we should not observe the type of candidate-specific effects we see in an era when elections were conducted principally by local and state party organizations. Given that our results do suggest such effects, however, we believe it is worthwhile to further examine congressional elections from this important, and largely understudied, era of politics.

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Notes

1. On this and related points, see also Engstrom (2006) and Carson, Engstrom, and Roberts (2007).
2. To be fair, we recognize that constituents and voters were occasionally exposed to sources of political news other than partisan newspapers during this early political era. For instance, Cunningham (1978) has documented the use of political circulars distributed by representatives in the early 19th century. However, these circular letters were confined primarily to the South and West and not the East where most of the partisan newspapers operated. Indeed, of the 269 identified circulars distributed by the 120 representatives who regularly sent them home during this era, over 90% hailed from either Southern or Western states. In many cases, these circulars were often reprinted in local partisan newspapers, which further bolsters our claim about the latter serving as the primary source of political information during this period.

3. For a revealing case study of the use of rhetoric by partisan newspapers in the Election of 1800, see Lerche (1948).
4. Indeed, we know almost nothing about the behavior of candidates running for office during this era. For evidence of strategic challenger behavior during the postbellum era, see Carson and Roberts (2013). See also Bensel (2004) for a more general discussion of elections during the mid-19th century.
5. We use the terms Republican, Jeffersonian Republican, or Democratic-Republican interchangeably in the article.
6. On this point, see also Sloan (1987, 1988, 1989) and Leonard (1986).
7. Although we hope to extend our research beyond the 1800-1820 period in future work, data constraints on partisan newspapers currently prevent us from moving beyond this early American period in history.
8. Unlike the contemporary era, some states during the early antebellum period elected candidates in multimember districts. This poses a potential measurement issue for how we deal with the Federalist share of the vote in single-member versus multimember districts. One possibility for dealing with this issue would be to use Niemi, Jackman, and Winsky's (1991) approach to calculating vote share in multimember districts by generating sets of pseudo-pairs between winning and losing candidates. Unfortunately, this approach can lead to an artificial inflation in candidate vote share among non-symmetrically contested races where candidates appear to receive 100% of the vote. Instead, we calculate vote share in multimember districts by comparing the vote share of the winning candidates with that of the losing candidates who ultimately came the closest to winning. The advantage of this measure is that it allows for a direct comparison between vote shares in single- and multimember districts.
9. This process was complicated slightly during redistricting years in our analysis. As much as possible, we matched "old" and "new" districts up by the individual who represented them continuously from one Congress to the next or by utilizing maps of district boundaries contained in Parsons, Beach, and Hermann (1978). In a limited number of cases, however, we had no choice but to exclude those candidates where we were unable to match up districts pre- and post-redistricting. Excluding these relatively few cases, however, does not change our substantive results.
10. Multicollinearity is not an issue in the models presented. The mean VIF statistic is 2.0 and individual factors were all below 3.0.
11. In the few instances when the party label did not match up between these sources, we relied on Martis (1989).
12. The congressional biographical directory can be accessed at <http://bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch.asp>
13. The Political Graveyard website can be accessed at <http://www.politicalgraveyard.com>
14. Utilizing each of these sources, we managed to collect background information on approximately 73% of the candidates seeking office in the 1800-1820 congressional elections. Following the lead of Jacobson (1989), we code candidates for whom we could not find any background information as non-quality in our

- data set. We also have tried imputing the missing data as well as restricting the sample to only those candidates for whom we could find background information and the substantive interpretation remains the same.
15. Data on circulation rates are unavailable for most newspapers during the time period of this study, which prevents us from including it as a right-hand side variable in our empirical models.
 16. The other published sources that Pasley reports using are *History of Printing in America*, *Opposition Press of the Federalist Period*, and *Revolution of American Conservatism*. For more detailed information about the sources Pasley (2001) used to construct his database of early American newspapers, see Appendix I in *The Tyranny of Printers*.
 17. Across our period of study, the mean number of Federalist newspapers by congressional district was 1.8, while the mean number of Republican papers was 1.3. In a limited number of cases, congressional districts contained parts of divided counties, which led us to use the district with the largest geographic area of the county in question. We also tried variations in how the counties were coded, but at no point did it change the substantive nature of our findings.
 18. Models 1 and 2 in Table 2 were generated using the `reg` command in Stata 10.
 19. The results are not substantively different regardless of whether we include or exclude multimember districts.
 20. In discussing the advantages of using the latent instrumental variable (LIV) method over the standard IV approach when one or more of the regressors is endogenous, Ebbes (2004) explains that “the [LIV] method allows for testing for endogeneity without requiring access to observable instruments. We apply the LIV method to an empirical measurement error application where a laboratory dummy instrumental variable is available. We show that the predicted LIV dummy instrument is identical to this observed laboratory instrument. Hence, the LIV estimate for the regression parameter, *without* using the observed instrument, is identical to the classical IV estimate that *does* require the existence of an observed instrument. We conclude that our ‘instrument-free’ approach can be successfully used to estimate regression parameters in the presence of regressor-error correlations, and to test for this dependency without the necessity of first finding valid instruments.”

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