

Why is There So Much Competition in U.S. Elections?

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Abstract

Most elections in the United States are not close, which has raised concerns among social scientists and reform advocates about the vibrancy of American democracy. In this essay, we demonstrate that while most elections are not close, most Americans regularly experience competitive contests. We argue that *hierarchical*, *temporal*, and *geographic* variation in the locus of competition results in most of the country regularly experiencing close elections. In the four-cycle period between 2006-2012, 90% of Americans were in a highly competitive jurisdiction for at least one office. Since 1914, about half the states have never gone more than four election cycles without a close statewide contest. Dispersed competition results in nearly all Americans being represented by both political parties for different offices, which has positive systemic consequences and offers an optimistic view of voters' ability to influence American politics.

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1 Introduction

Genuine competition is so central to the idea of democracy that we treat it as a necessary condition. Without political leaders competing for votes in an election, a democratic system may be democratic in name only (Schumpeter 1947; Mann and Cain 2005). But U.S. scholars, activists, and journalists employing diagnostics of competition see unflattering signs. At all levels of electoral contestation, but especially at the Presidential and Congressional levels, analysts point out how few Americans actually experience a closely fought election. The majority of citizens appear to be bystanders of democracy rather than full-fledged participants. Making matters worse, in America's local jurisdictions the populations are more ideologically homogenous. There, we may expect that these enclaves see even less competition than larger jurisdictions like Congressional districts (Gerring et al. 2015; Schleicher 2007).

Reflecting upon the lack of competition in American elections, a generation of scholars has sought to understand both the causes and consequences of uncompetitive elections. For instance, the robust literature on the incumbency advantage is motivated by evidence of vanishing marginal elections (Mayhew 1974).¹ A wide-ranging agenda for policy reform is also motivated by the apparent lack of electoral competition. Electoral College reform, redistricting reform, campaign finance reform, term limits, and ballot access to third parties are among the many fixes advocated to solve the problem of uncompetitive elections (Persily 2006; Basham and Polhill 2005). Each of these reforms would constitute a fundamental change in the American electoral process, with implications for campaign strategy, voter learning, and representation (Lipsitz 2011).

But how uncompetitive are elections in the United States? In this essay we take a new perspective on this question, adding an important amendment to the conventional view at

¹For recent examples, see Fowler and Hall (2016); Hainmueller, Hall and Snyder Jr. (2015).

the root of this research agenda. Namely, we demonstrate that while in any one election cycle and in any one type of an election (e.g. President, U.S. House) the majority of voters may not experience a closely fought contest, the unusual frequency and variety of elections in American politics generates a system in which nearly all Americans regularly experience competitive elections.

The fact that a large majority of Americans see close elections holds lessons for our understanding of contemporary American politics. One major consequence is that nearly all Americans are represented by officeholders of both political parties. Of course, we do not dispute that there can be negative consequences to a lack of competition in any one election or in a set of elections. A lack of competition may make some politicians less responsive (Ansolabehere, Brady and Fiorina 1992) and make voters less inclined to engage in politics (Franklin 2004; Evans, Ensley and Carmines 2014). We also do not dispute the claim that election regulations can make contests more or less competitive and thus render reform efforts significant (Mann and Cain 2005). We do dispute what we take as a conventional descriptive view that most voters are disenfranchised from real electoral contestation. Rhetoric calling the supposed lack of competition in American politics “scandalous” or characteristic of a “dubious democracy” does not square with the evidence we present here of robust electoral competition.² While most elections in the United States are not close contests, most Americans do experience close elections.

Our essay proceeds as follows: First, we outline the mechanisms that produce competitive elections, focusing on how the temporal, geographic, and hierarchical nature of variation in political contexts generates an ever-shifting locus of competition. Next, we explain how we combine detailed Census data with election results to geocode competition at the level of intersecting jurisdictional boundaries. Using such data, our main analysis proceeds in

²See Adam Nagourney, “States See Growing Campaign to Change Redistricting Laws,” *New York Times*, 7 Feb 2005, for quote from Professor Issacharoff calling the lack of competition scandalous. See Fairvote.org’s report on Congressional elections titled “Dubious Democracy.”

describing the level of competition experienced by Americans in recent elections. In the short span of time between 2006 and 2012, 89% of Americans witnessed a general election in which the winner won by fewer than 10 points (e.g. a 55-45 victory). We justify our empirical definition of closeness and show how the result varies under different thresholds for closeness. A secondary analysis follows, drawing on statewide races from 1914-2012. We demonstrate that the patterns we see for recent elections are unlikely to be outliers in the historical record. As a final step, we consider the impact of robust competition on representation. After all, competition matters little to the average voter if their side always wins or always loses. Analyzing the distribution of partisan elected officials in geographic space, we again challenge the conventional wisdom and establish that the competitive environment found in the United States results in most citizens being represented by both parties for different offices.

2 The Engines of Competition

Consider the imaginary, but instructive, scenario in which nearly every citizen is a partisan, always votes, and always votes the party line. Some voters live in places where all citizens share a party affiliation while others live in places where partisans are mixed together. If one were to study the margin between first-place and second-place candidates in this scenario, the same electoral geographies would always exhibit the close contests, in every year and for every office. Such areas would be “universal battlegrounds” — hotly contested by both parties — while the rest of the country would be a competitive drought-land. In such a scenario, all elections are dependent on each other; they could be perfectly predicted by examining a single election in a single year.

This unrealistic scenario might not be too far from the caricature in the heads of many political observers who see high rates of partisan fidelity and well-sorted political parties,

and who lament how many states and districts are uncompetitive. Researchers are not immune to this type of thinking: The widespread use of measures of competitiveness based on presidential election results (e.g. Cook Political Report’s Partisan Voting Index, designations of “battleground” and “blackout” states (Johnson 2005; Grofman and Feld 2005)) and most methods of constructing a “normal vote” assume a strong correlation in patterns of behavior across electoral levels and election cycle to election cycle.

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

Geographic variation in competition. The median voter theorem gives us reason to believe that competition will be dispersed geographically. Republicans field candidates in Massachusetts and Democrats do the same in Alabama. Such contestation requires even the most partisan of office-seekers to appeal to the middle of the electorate (Downs 1957; Cox 1997). Voters are not choosing between unvarying Republican and Democratic parties, but instead select candidates whose views are shaped by the context in which they seek office. As Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder Jr. (2006) have written, in very few places in America is the electorate so one-sided in its preferences that offices are out of reach of the other party. By emphasizing and prioritizing issues strategically, and doing so at the right time, otherwise polarized politicians do appeal to the center when necessary and generate close contests across a range of politically diverse geographies. This phenomenon, while incongruous with a view of contemporary politics characterized by strong partisan loyalty

in the mass public and among elites (Bartels 2000; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006), is precisely what Constitutional framers intended from a federal system.

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

Hierarchical variation in competition. While voters may abstain from down-ballot races, they also show a willingness to vote for different parties in different offices, generating hierarchical variation in the locus of competition. Competition across levels of government is less highly correlated than one might expect from an electorate that is loyal to its party and faced with candidates who keep to the party line. In the most striking example, Presidents, Governors, and Senators face the same state electorates, even at the same time, but rarely all receive the same vote share. Concepts like split-ticket voting, midterm loss, and divided

government depend in part on variation in citizens' partisan vote choice based on the level of office (Campbell and Miller 1957; Kritzer and Eubank 1979; Tompkins 1988; Jacobson 1990; Atkeson and Partin 1995; Fiorina 1992; Burden and Kimball 1998). In some instances, this is due to office-specific contextual factors: a race can feature an incumbent or not, a scandal-ridden candidate or not, a critical roll-call vote or not, an exogenous shock or not. Candidates also have different issues of emphasis, generally related to their differing roles depending on the level of government they seek. The result: hierarchical variation in the locus of competition.

Thus, multiple mechanisms individually and collectively can result in a large share of the electorate experiencing competition, even when most elections in one year or for one office are uncompetitive. These geographic, temporal, and hierarchical variations in competition are somewhat obvious, but are often missed in the political science literature on competition. The likely source of this blind spot is an unintended consequence of the design of much research on American elections: Nearly every study deals with one kind of election only, such as Presidential or Congressional. Many studies focus on only a single election cycle. This shortcoming is all the more understandable when we arrive at our own data analysis and deal with the complexity of locating the variety of elections in which each American voter has the ability to participate. Broadening the view to multiple election cycles and levels of office, the contours of American political competition come into clearer view. And that view shows a surprising variation in the locus of competition. The finding that a large majority of Americans see close elections, while contrary to the conventional wisdom, is perhaps less surprising when we reflect on the core institutional features of American electoral politics - frequent elections (which permits temporal variation) for many different offices (which permits hierarchical variation) in a federal system (which permits geographic variation).

2.1 A Tale of Two States

To make concrete how *geographical*, *temporal*, and *hierarchical* variation in electoral context produces widespread competition, consider two states on opposite sides of the political spectrum: Massachusetts and Alabama. In Massachusetts, President Obama won by 26 points in 2008 and by 23 points in 2012. In Alabama, Obama lost by 22 points in both years. As of 2016, Massachusetts' nine Congressional seats and two Senate seats are held by Democrats. Apart from Alabama's one majority-minority district, its Congressional districts and Senate seats are all held by Republicans. At first glance, these states are exemplars of the competitive drought-lands that are presumed to dominate American elections.

A closer look indicates a more complex story. In both 2006 and 2008, the Republican Party was in the White House and was unpopular. In those years, the Democrats in Massachusetts were safe, but the Republicans in Alabama were not. In the 2008 election for Alabama's second Congressional district, Democrat Bobby Bright won an open-seat contest by a half a point. Bright was able to succeed as a conservative Democrat, with anti-abortion and pro-gun policy positions. In the fifth district, Democrat Parker Griffith won an open seat by four points. He too was conservative; he even switched affiliation and became a Republican by the end of his term.

In 2010, the political winds shifted strongly against the Democrats, who by then held the Presidency, Senate, and House. In Alabama, Republican Martha Roby defeated Bobby Bright in the second district by two points. A new Republican, Mo Brooks, defeated Democrat-turned-Republican Parker Griffith in a landslide. With the winds against Democrats, even Democratic incumbents in Massachusetts faced problems. The incumbent governor, Deval Patrick, won re-election by a narrow six points against challenger Charlie Baker. Baker's liberal positions on issues like gay marriage, abortion, and gun control put him far to the left of the Republican Party nationally. That same year in Massachusetts, a Democrat won an open seat in the tenth Congressional district by fewer than 5 points, and Republican

Scott Brown won an open Senate seat by five points. In 2012, when the Democratic Party nationally was again more popular, Brown lost by seven and a half points, another close contest.

This anecdotal sketch suggests that *geographical*, *temporal*, and *hierarchical* variation in races results in more competition than one might expect from loyal voters and a strong party brand. First, the profiles of Democratic and Republican candidates do vary across geographies; in other words, the median voter matters. The kind of Republican who generates a close contest for high-profile elections in Massachusetts is going to look quite different from Republicans broadly. The Republicans who have won or narrowly lost in Massachusetts are on the far left *of their party*. Likewise for Democrats, only the most conservative ones can stimulate a close contest in Alabama.

Importantly, the ways that Democrats campaign in conservative electorates and Republicans campaign in liberal electorates are not always easy to decipher from roll call votes, stated issue positions, or donor bases. Even candidate surveys (such as NPAT survey used in Ansolabehere, Snyder Jr. and Stewart III 2001) fail to account for the nuance and emphasis that candidates place on issues. For instance, while some Republican governors in left-leaning states, like Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker, or like Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner, are pro-choice, there are other cases like New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, who is pro-life but has told voters that he would not use his office to “force that down people’s throats”³ and Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, who is pro-life, but says “I don’t apologize for that, but I don’t focus on that; I don’t obsess with it.”⁴ Emphasis of issues is likely to be important to voters, but is rarely captured in the one-dimensional spatial models that political scientists typically employ.

³Claire Heining, “Chris Christie Promises Change to A ‘Broken’ State in Campaign Kickoff,” NJ.com, February 4, 2009.

⁴David Cook, “Gov. Scott Walker’s Position on Abortion: ‘I Don’t Obsess with It,’ ” Christian Science Monitor, December 2, 2013.

The second lesson from the Massachusetts-Alabama anecdote is that temporal variation in races matters too. Being a conservative Democrat in Alabama or a liberal Republican in Massachusetts is not sufficient for a close contest to emerge. Like comedy, politics is all about timing. In a year that favors Democrats generally, seats are safe for Democrats in Massachusetts and might be contestable by a moderate Democrat in Alabama. In a year that favors Republicans generally, the Alabama seats are safe for Republicans and the well-positioned Republican could win in Massachusetts.

Third, competitiveness need not be correlated hierarchically, across levels of office. Clearly, both Massachusetts and Alabama can see competition in sub-Presidential offices even though they are in 2008 and 2012 completely uncompetitive - and essentially uncontested - at the Presidential level. Digging deeper, we can see competition spread out across geographic areas because competition in races is not hierarchically correlated. For instance, in 2010, 23% of Alabamians had a competitive state senate district. It happens that 99% of them were not in the one U.S. congressional district that was competitive that year. Likewise, fourteen percent of Alabamians were in a competitive state house district in 2010, and half of those voters were not also in a competitive state senate race. It is because competition at one level is not highly correlated with competition at other levels that even in a state like Alabama, which had no competitive Presidential, gubernatorial, or senatorial election between 2006 and 2012, nearly two-thirds of the population witnessed a highly competitive general election contest.

2.2 Research Questions

Drawing on the theoretical and anecdotal bases for competition described above, our paper focuses on identifying competition from the perspective of citizens. Over a period of several election cycles, what percentage of the electorate sees a competitive election? Where in the United States is there an absence of competition? In so doing, we aim to

locate competition across space, time, and level of office, with careful attention paid to the robustness of our findings depending on the thresholds used to define competition.

We then transition to an analysis exploring the implications of such dispersed competition. Is the near-universal voter experience with close elections coupled with the experience of mixed-party control? Of course, it is possible for many voters to experience close contests without those contests ever resulting in the incumbent party switching. Yet, in a period of six years, we show that almost 90% of Americans have been represented by both Democrats and Republicans.

3 Data and Estimation Strategy

Our first analysis covers elections between 2006 and 2012. In this analysis, we study six kinds of elections: state-level Presidential, Senatorial, Gubernatorial, Congressional, state legislative upper chamber, and state legislative lower chamber. Data for federal and gubernatorial elections is drawn from the Congressional Quarterly (CQ) Voting and Elections Collection. CQ provides candidate-specific election results, along with counts of total ballots cast in each election. State legislative election information was extracted from candidate-level data provided by Klarner et al. (2013) and Klarner (2013). Most of these elections occur in November of even-numbered years, but a few states hold gubernatorial and state legislative elections in odd-numbered years. These elections are also included in the analysis. We do not include races for other statewide offices (e.g. attorney general), partisan primary elections, or municipal races for the sake of simplicity and due to data availability. But, adding additional races would only show how much *more* of the population sees competition in elections; thus one may see our study as a conservative description of electoral contestation in the United States.

Throughout our study, competitiveness is conceptualized as the margin of victory for

the winning candidate, which is calculated as the number of votes separating the first and second place candidates for an office divided by the total number of votes cast for the same office.⁵ Such a measure of electoral closeness is standard in the literature (Geys 2006; Fraga and Hersh 2010), and also allows us to account for situations where competitive candidates are not from either of the two major parties. For presidential elections, we use state-level information on the popular vote as allocated to candidates by party, understanding that much of the literature on competition in presidential elections decries a lack of competitiveness at the *state* level.

In order to establish how many Americans experience competitive elections, we combine these measures of electoral competition with data from the 2010 U.S. Census. The Census provides counts of the enumerated voting-age population residing within each state, congressional district, state upper house district, and state lower house district, both before and after the 2012 round of redistricting.⁶ By aggregating these counts to the level of the state or district we can examine what proportion of the population experienced a close election for a given office in a given year, and which parts of the country experienced competition for said office during the period from 2006-2012.

While the combined election results and Census data above allow an exploration of temporal and geographic variation in competition, to understand *hierarchical* variation in competition we must account for the fact that voting jurisdictions intersect and overlap across levels of office. Just as not all voters with the same U.S. Senate election vote in the same U.S. House of Representatives election, there is variation *within the same congressional district* as to the state legislative elections voters will participate in. Furthermore, state legislative district boundaries often cross congressional district boundaries, and cross each other such

⁵In state legislative elections with multimember districts, the margin of victory is calculated as the number of votes separating the “last winner” versus the “first loser,” divided by the total number of votes cast in the multimember district.

⁶Data are available at <https://www.census.gov/rdo/data/>.

that state senate and state house jurisdictions do not “nest” neatly within each other. Redistricting adds a further wrinkle. Without changing residences, a voter may have been in one congressional district in 2010 but a different one in 2012. Two voters who stayed in the same congressional district before and after redistricting might have shared a state senate district in 2010 but ended up in different state senate districts for 2012.⁷

Fortunately, the same U.S. Census data that allows us to count the voting-age population within each district can allow us to examine the population residing within the *sets* of jurisdictions that correspond to the six levels of office we study. To do so, we use population counts at the lowest level of aggregation provided by the Census bureau — the census block — and rely on Census-provided correspondence tables to aggregate counts to the unique intersection of all of the electoral boundaries used in the elections we study.⁸ Since the correspondence tables also indicate the pre and post-redistricting districts each block was assigned to, we can also account for shifting district boundaries. As a result, we can examine not only the temporal and geographic variation in competition experienced by U.S. adults, but also the hierarchical variation in competition brought forth by the overlapping jurisdictional boundaries corresponding to different elected offices.

As an example, consider Connecticut in Figure 1. Leveraging the TIGER/Line geographic shapefiles also constructed by the Census,⁹ we used GIS software to combine all of the district boundaries both before and after redistricting. In black lines, we divide the state into its Congressional districts. Notice that there are small areas outlined by black lines that

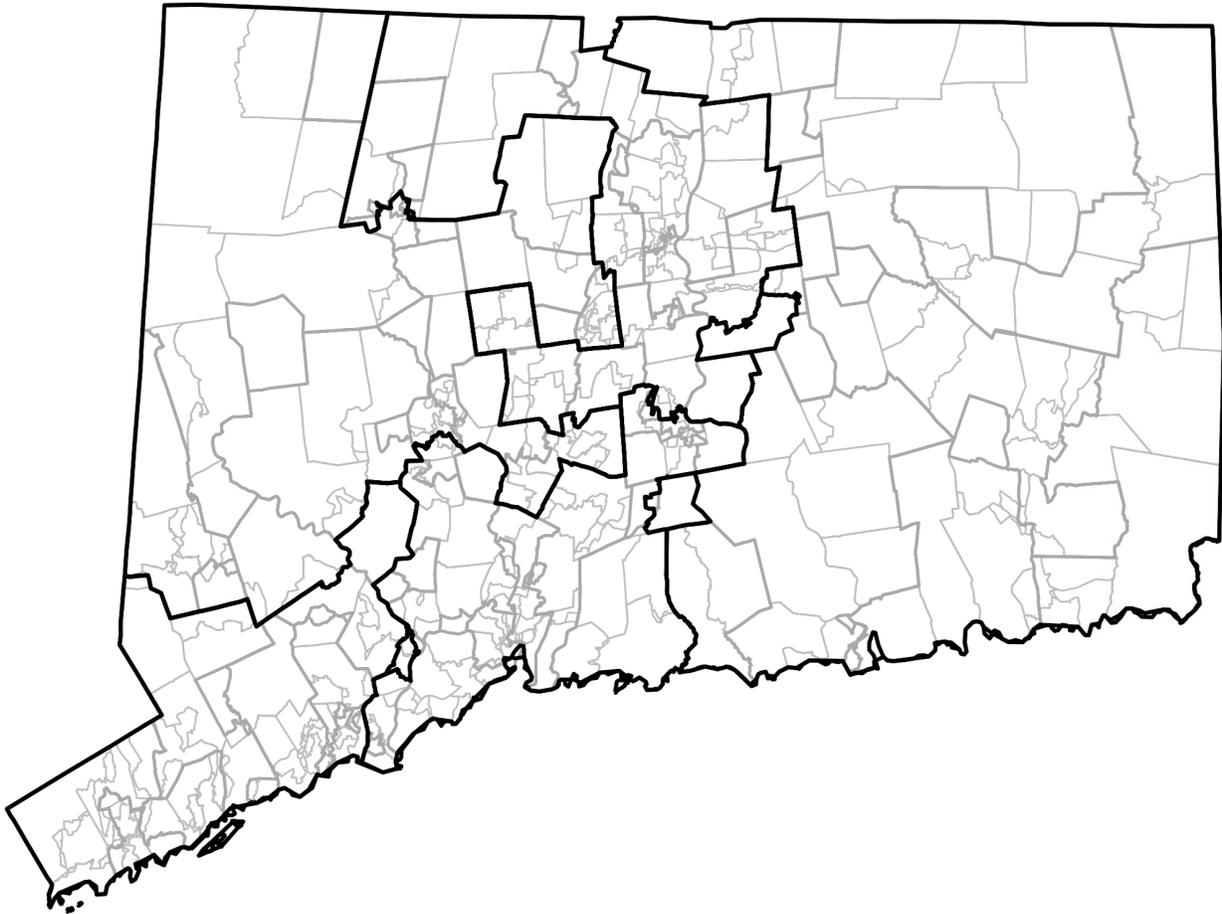
⁷While precincts are generally recognized as administrative units where all voters vote on the same set of candidates, precinct boundaries can change from year-to-year and are often completely reorganized following a redistricting cycle. Thus while precinct-level analyses would allow for an examination of geographic and hierarchical variation in competitiveness, the temporal dynamic would be lost.

⁸Block-level data is only available for the voting-age population in 2010. The American Communities Survey (ACS), Current Population Survey (CPS), and other survey-based Census products with information on citizenship and voter turnout are not available at the block level and thus cannot be used in our analysis. Also, a very small number of census blocks are “split” in the districting process, with portions of a block assigned to different districts. We do not account for these block splits in the analysis.

⁹Available at <https://www.census.gov/geo/maps-data/data/tiger-line.html>

represent areas that switched Congressional districts between 2010 and 2012. In thick gray lines, we overlay state senate districts, including changes made in redistricting. In thin gray lines, we show the state house districts. Each unique polygon in this map saw a different set of elections over our time frame.

Figure 1: Unique Jurisdictions in Connecticut, 2006-2012



Note: This map of Connecticut illustrates the individual units that we study in our analysis. We count the number of voters residing in each non-overlapping polygon to determine the state, Congressional, and state legislative races they witnessed between 2006 and 2012. The black lines designate Congressional districts. Thick gray lines designate State Senate districts. Thin gray lines designate State House districts.

For each non-overlapping polygon, we aggregate the number of voting-age Americans residing in this area in April 2010, the month in which the census was administered.¹⁰ Since each of these geographic areas witnessed the same set of elections over the period from 2006-2012, we are able to merge these counts with the aforementioned data on electoral competition and thus generate a consistent measure of how many adults experienced competitive elections in different years, in different areas, or for different levels of office.

To broaden our analysis beyond 2006-2012, we conduct a second analysis using data on the fifty biennial elections between 1914 and 2012. The CQ Voting and Elections Collection again provides the election results. To simplify matters, this analysis only deals with the three statewide elections, for President, Senator, and Governor.¹¹ We examine the number of election cycles each state faces before encountering a close statewide election using the same measures of closeness developed for the analysis of the 2006-2012 data.

3.1 Defining Competition

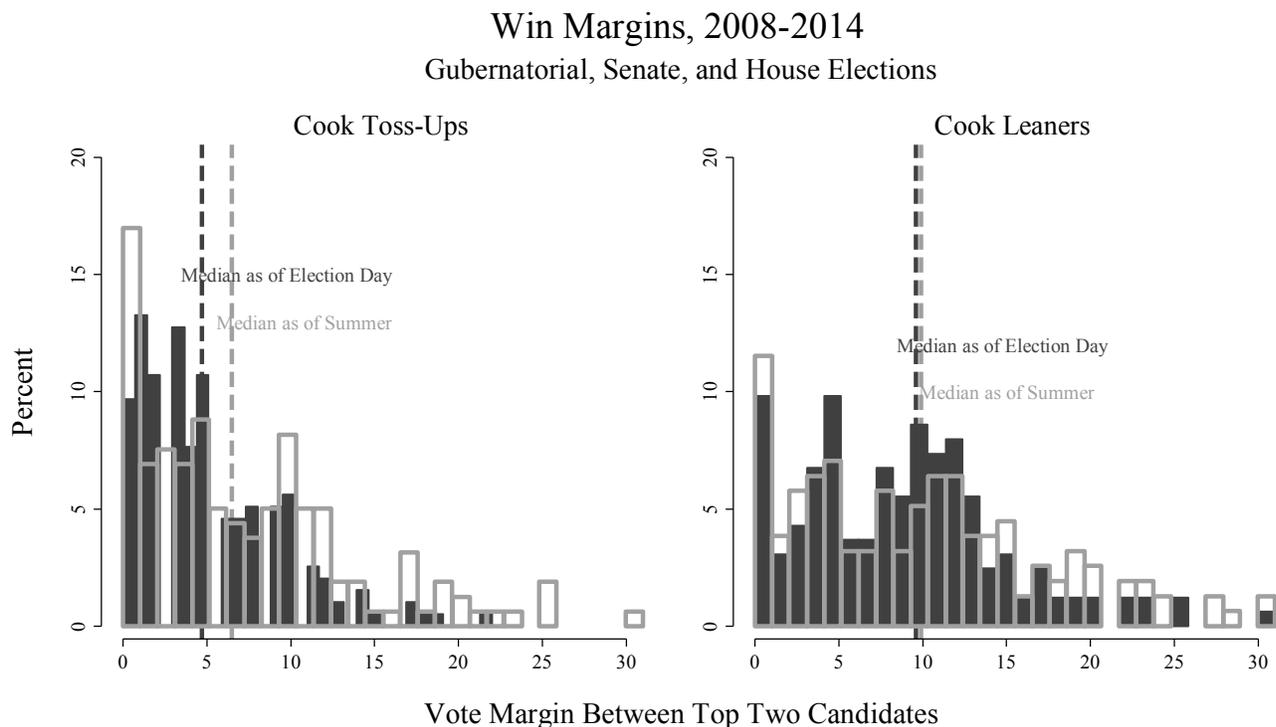
We seek to identify close races based on the vote margin between the first and second place finishers. But what counts as a close contest? To answer this initial question, we turn to the Cook Political Report, which regularly evaluates races on a seven point scale (Solid Democratic, Likely Democratic,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

Cook ratings are not available for all races or for all years, but they are a useful way to gauge the relationship between vote share and predicted closeness. In Figure 2, on the left panel, we plot the vote share for all of Cook's toss-up races in House, Senate, and Gubernatorial contests from 2008-2014. We show two versions of the data. First, we use the

¹⁰We ignore population mobility within our six year period of analysis, as the block-level data necessary for our analysis is based solely on the enumerated count of individuals done in the decennial census.

¹¹Again, the exclusion of other elections means our measures of competitiveness are conservative estimates of the actual electoral competition witnessed over the time period.

Figure 2: Using Cook Political Report’s Race Classification to Determine Cutoff of Close Election



Cook rating from the organization’s final update ahead of the election. Second, we use the rating from the summer prior to the election.¹² It is worth noting that pre-election measures of closeness are volatile. An election that is closely contested four months ahead of Election Day may turn into a rout.

As Figure 2 shows, the typical (median) toss-up race ended up with a vote margin of about 5 percentage points (e.g. a 52.5 to 47.5 spread). The median race considered a toss-up in the summer had a slightly higher margin (6.5 points).

In the right side of Figure 2, we show races marked as leaning Democratic or leaning

¹²We utilized the Cook rating closest to July 1 of the election year. We did not use Cook’s presidential ratings in this scale because the presidential years were not publicly available for both summer and pre-Election Day in the years under investigation.

Republican, according to Cook's pre-Election Day and summer estimates. This is Cook's measure of next-closest races. These contests are generally hotly contested as well. For instance, at the end of October 2016, Cook considered the states of Nevada, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Georgia, and Utah to be leaning Democratic or leaning Republican in the Presidential contest. Most of these states received substantial attention from the presidential campaigns and would widely be considered to be competitive environments. Whether measured in summer or before Election Day, the median leaning race ends up with a vote margin of 10 percentage points (a 55-45 race).

Accordingly, we will utilize a more stringent 5 point margin and a less stringent 10 point margin as cutoffs for defining close races. Of course, when looking at tens of thousands of races, no estimate of closeness is perfect. But given the Cook data, 5 and 10 point margins are useful approximations.¹³

4 The Locus of Competition

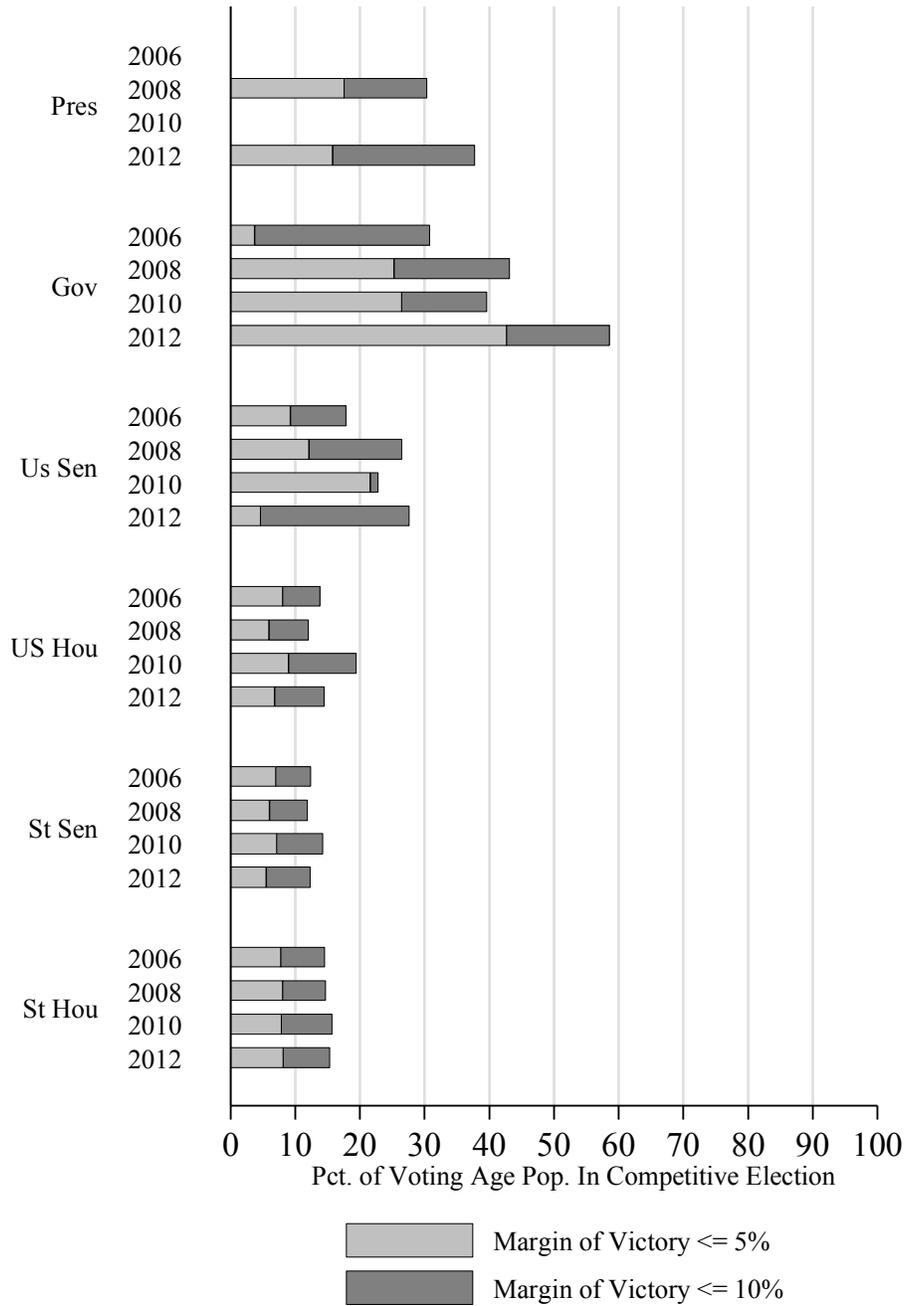
4.1 Results

Our empirical analysis begins with the four-cycle period from 2006 to 2012. We examine the extent of competition across races and time. Consider Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3 shows for each type of election in each year, the percent of the population seeing a close election. In the U.S. Senate and state offices, not every voter was eligible to participate in each specific year, and thus the denominator in this graph adjusts based on voters who did have the opportunity to vote in an election for the specific office in that year. For instance, since all U.S. House races are up for election every two years, the denominator for these races in the chart is always measured as 234 million. On the other hand, in 2008, only a few states held gubernatorial elections. Thus, just over 40% of only 28.7 million voters

¹³We also show how our results vary by thresholds from 1 percentage point to 30 percentage points.

Figure 3: Close Election by Year and Office



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

saw a close contest in that setting.

Figure 3 illustrates the commonly known feature of American politics: in any one election year, for any particular office, the vast majority of voters do not see a close contest. In none of the four Congressional cycles here did even 20% of adults see a ≤ 10 point margin in a U.S. House race. The same is true for state legislative races.¹⁴ State-level races (i.e. Senate, Governor, Electoral College) show larger proportions of the electorate seeing a competitive race. But still, most voters are “bystanders” in any one particular election. In the Presidential and Senate elections, about a third of voters see a close race. In Gubernatorial races, only in 2012 do most eligible voters see a competitive race. However, only eleven states held gubernatorial races in 2012 (i.e. the denominator in this measure only includes individuals in these states), and so still few voters saw competition in this election.

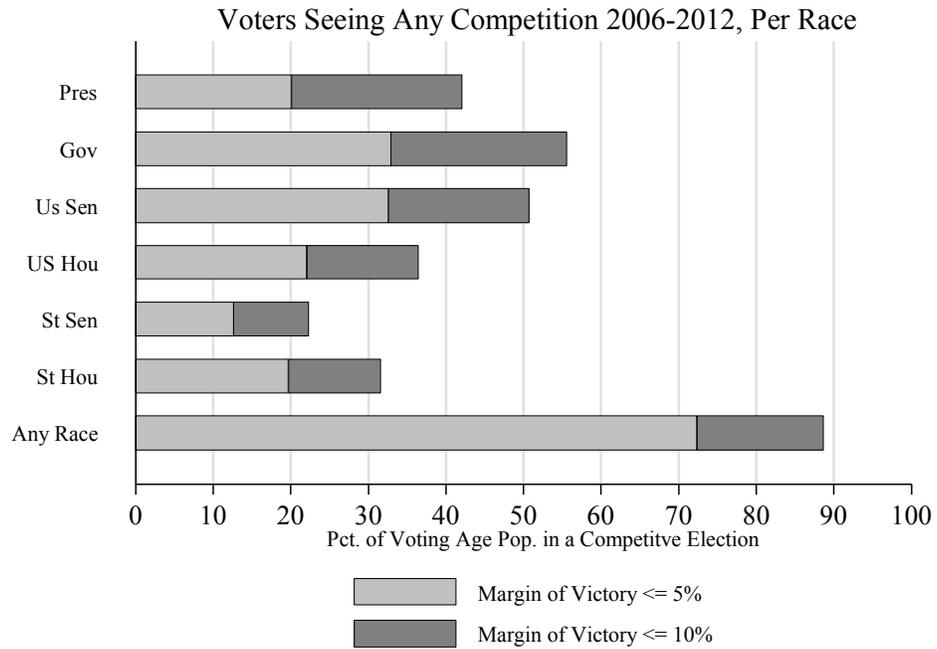
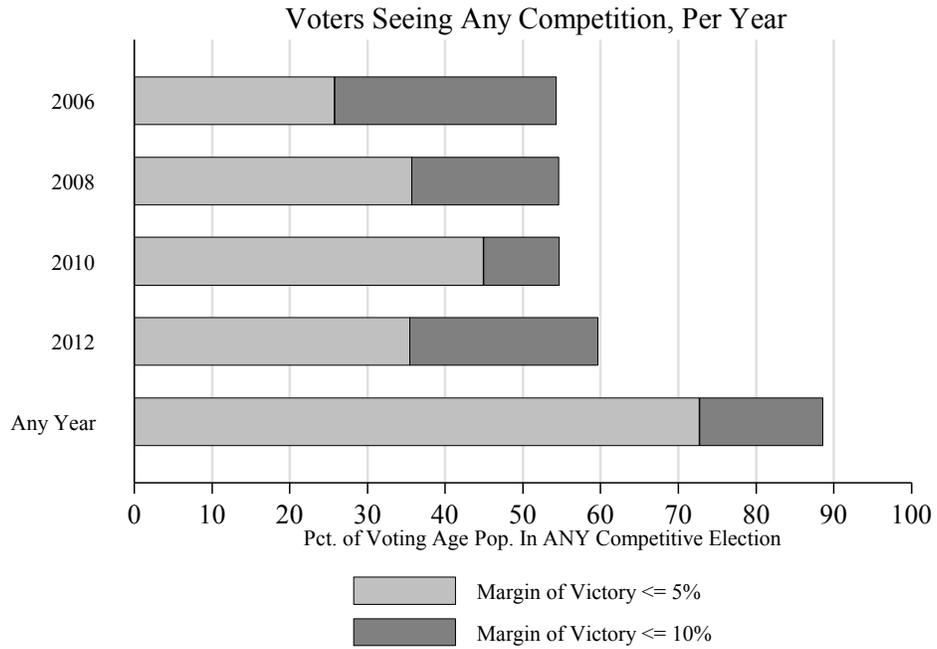
If one were to observe the evidence in Figure 3 and assume that the locus of competition across races and years is unchanging, then one would conclude that most Americans are bystanders to closely contested races. If competition is concentrated in the same places all the time — for every office and in every year — then indeed most voters would not have the opportunity to participate in a competitive election.

But Figure 4 tells a different story. In the upper plot, we calculate the percentage of voters who saw at least one competitive race in each year. In each of the four years, more than half of the eligible population saw a close (e.g. 55-45) race on the ballot. About a third of the population saw a race with a razor thin (≤ 5 point) margin.

In the lower plot of Figure 4, we calculate the data by race and collapse the years. We see, for example, that while in no single year did even 20% of the population see a competitive U.S. House race, 36% of adults saw a close race at least once between 2006 and 2012. All offices, in fact, show much more competition across years than if measured in any

¹⁴It is worth noting that somewhat contrary to the expectations of Gerring et al. (2015), even though state senate districts are larger than state house districts, more voters witness close races at the state house level than the state senate level.

Figure 4: Close Election by Year and Office, Collapsed



one particular year.

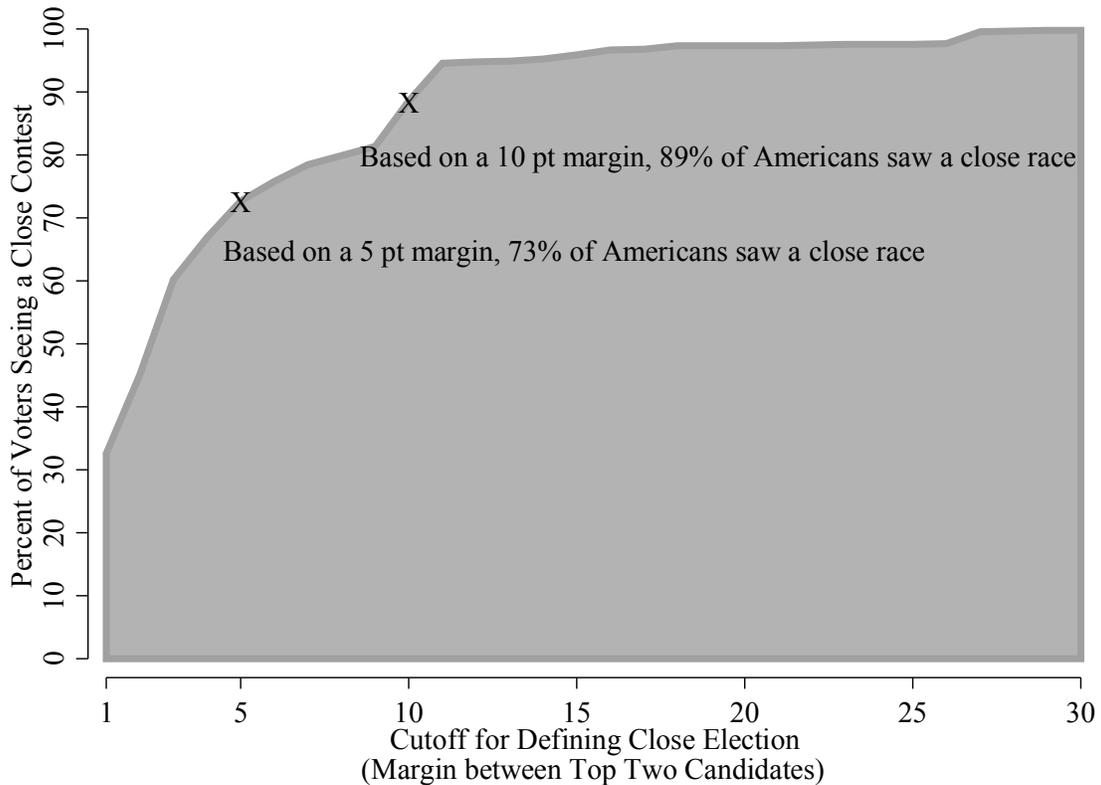
Not all levels of office are of equal importance, and it is worth noting that the statewide offices of senator and especially governor are the most competitive offices. Possible explanations are the absence of redistricting in statewide races and the presence of term limits in most gubernatorial offices. Whatever the reason, much of the competition witnessed by voters is attributable to frequently competitive statewide rather than district offices.

In the lowermost point estimate in the top and bottom of Figure 4, we calculate the percentage of the population that saw at least one competitive election in any office in any year under study. It turns out that 73% of the population saw a race with less than a five point margin of victory and 89% saw a race with less than a ten point margin of victory. Even excluding the state house and senate races, and focusing just on elections for President, Governor, Senator, and Representative, 83% of the population saw an election with less than a ten-point margin in this time frame. Again, this analysis is based only on elections for just a few offices over the course of just six years. It does not take into account voters who saw competitive primaries or municipal races.

How sensitive is this result to defining close elections based on a 5 or 10 percentage point cutoff? To answer this question, consult Figure 5. Here, we vary the cutoff from a margin of one percentage point to a margin of 30 percentage points. As the figure shows, the share of the electorate that sees a close contest increases steeply as closeness is defined between 1 percentage point (wherein a third of the electorate has seen a close race) and 10 percentage points (wherein 90% has seen a close race). At cutoffs greater than 10, nearly the whole electorate has seen a race considered close. As a reminder, we chose cutoffs of 5 and 10 percentage points based on the results of typical elections that are considered toss-ups and leaning races in pre-election estimates.

In Figure 6, we visualize map locations that have been subject to electoral competition. For each of our non-intersecting polygons, dark gray denotes places that had at least one

Figure 5: The Effect of Cutoff Definition on Result

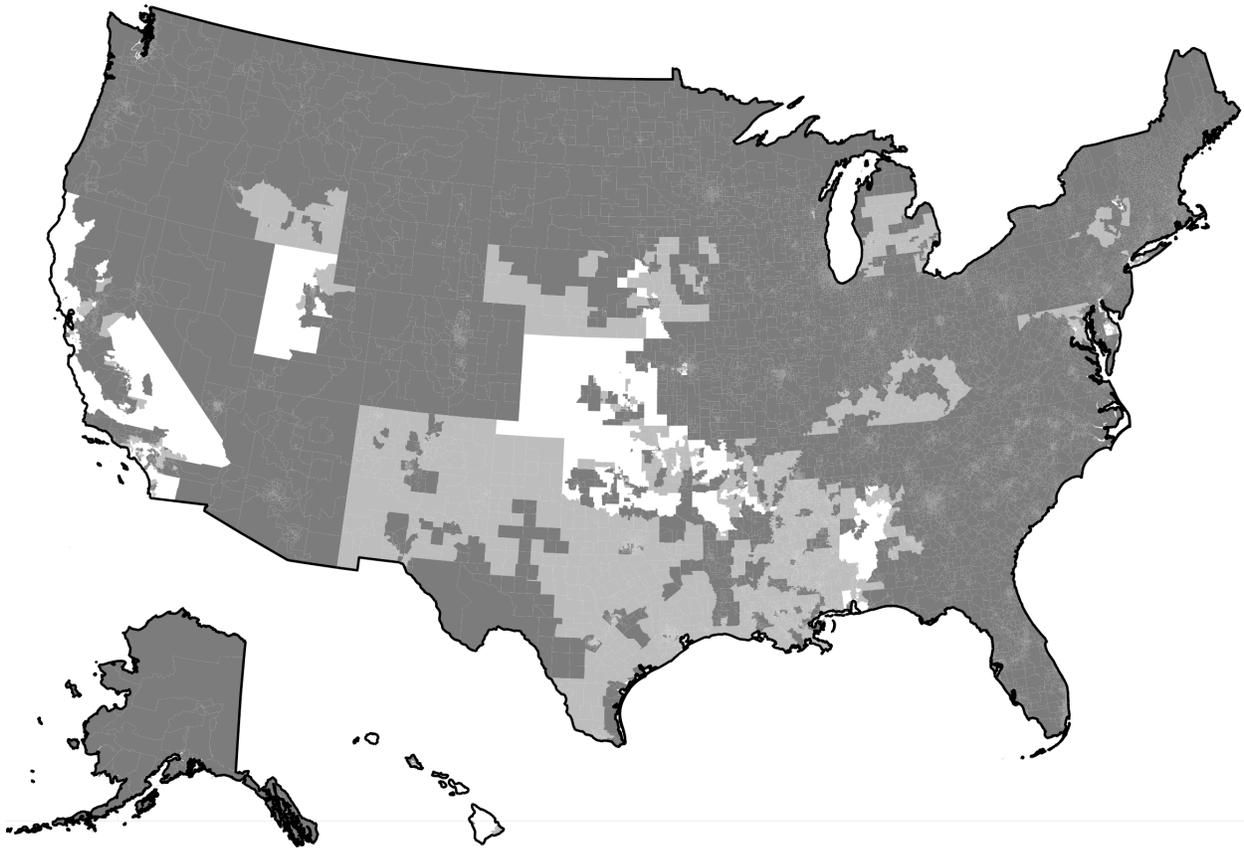


Note: We define a close election as a contest in which the margin of victory is less than z , where z is measured in 1 percentage point increments from 1 to 30. The y-axis plots the percentage of voters who see at least one close election between 2006-2012, at each value of z . Where $z=5$ and $z=10$, X's are displayed. These are the values plotted in Figure 4.

race with less than a five point margin, light gray denotes places that had at least one race with a 5-10 point margin, and white denotes places that had no races with a close margin.

Two major, distinct regions of the country are competitive drought-lands. Most prominently displayed on the map, the center of the country, including much of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas, hosted neither competitive statewide races nor legislative races between 2006 and 2012. Second, much of California, including some populated coastal areas, also saw no competition at the state level or for legislative offices. Obviously, in this time period, the

Figure 6: Geography of Close Contests

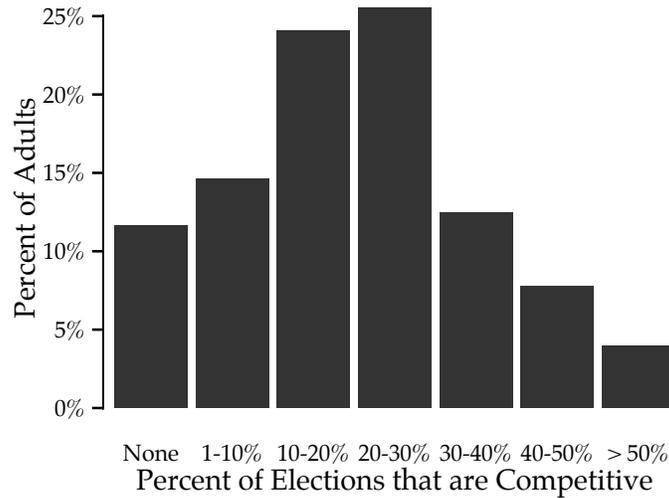


Note: Dark gray represents locations that witnessed at least one race with less than a five point margin of victory. Light gray represents areas with less than a ten point margin of victory. White represents an area with no competitive contest between 2006 and 2012.

California offices are dominated by Democrats while the central region offices are dominated by Republicans.

California and the central region are interesting because they are outliers on the map. The most important feature of the map is how much of the country saw close competition in this short amount of time. This includes all of New England, nearly all of the old South, nearly all of the midwest, mountain west, and pacific northwest. That is, it includes almost the whole country, urban and rural, racially diverse and racially homogenous, liberal and

Figure 7: Competitive Contests as Share of Total Number of Elections



Note: Histogram reflects the number of persons living in areas where the indicated proportion of all elections held from 2006 to 2012 had a vote margin of less than 10 percentage points.

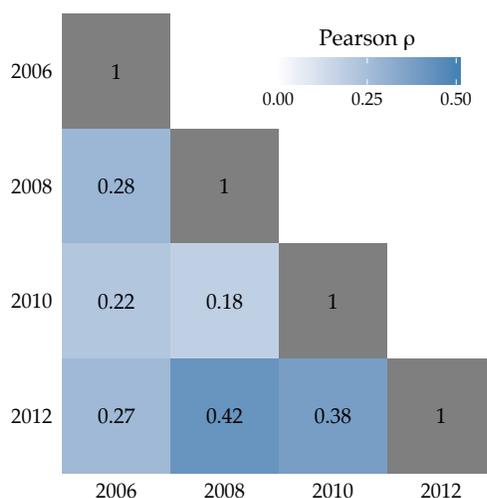
conservative.

While citizens in nearly every part of the country experience at least one close election in a relatively short time span, it is still likely that most elections experienced by voters are not competitive. Indeed, Figure 4 indicates that the vast majority of individual elections do not involve meaningful competition. Do most voters experience a *single, isolated* competitive election, while nearly all other elections are foregone conclusions? To explore this possibility, we examine what *percent* of all elections a voter saw between 2006 and 2012 that qualified as competitive.¹⁵ Figure 7 indicates that, indeed, most Americans see more uncompetitive elections than competitive contests, but it would be incorrect to say that contested races are a rare occurrence. About one out of every five elections is competitive for the average American adult, and 25% of adults have competitive elections at least 30% of the time.

Despite the fact that most Americans see one or more competitive elections over a rela-

¹⁵The median number of elections an adult saw between 2006 and 2012 was 17. The minimum number of elections was 9, and the maximum was 22.

Figure 8: Year-to-Year Correlations of Competitiveness



Note: For each geographic area, we measure the percent of elections in which the vote margin was less than 10 percentage points. We plot the year-to-year correlations of the percent competitive.

tively short time span, we might be concerned that some areas see many competitive elections year after year while close contests are a rarity in other parts of the country. To emphasize the temporal variation in the locus of competition, we plot year-to-year correlations in Figure 8. For each geographic area, we calculate the percent of all elections that had less than a ten-point margin of victory per year. The plot shows the correlations of these percentages. While competition is positively correlated year to year, the relationship is — perhaps surprisingly — quite weak.¹⁶

Conditional probabilities can help us convey the positive, but weak, relationship. Consider that of voters who saw a competitive race in 2006, 64% of them saw a competitive race in 2008. But of those who did not see a competitive race in 2006, 46% of them saw a competitive race in 2008. Thirty-eight percent of voters who saw no competitive race in

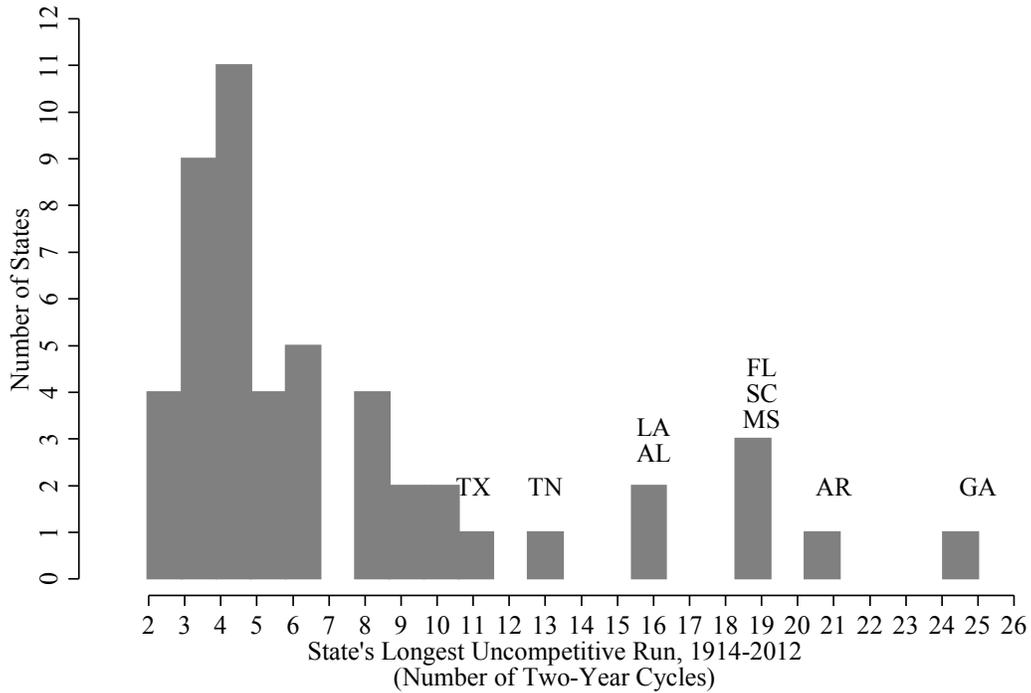
¹⁶As an interesting aside, the correlation between 2010 and 2012 is on the higher side of the estimates, which may also come as a surprise considering strategic redistricting is often blamed for depressing competition.

2008 saw one in 2010. Thirty-eight percent who saw no competition in 2010 also saw a competitive race in 2012. With this amount of year-to-year fluctuation, it is easy to understand how, after just a few election cycles, nearly all Americans see a competitive race.

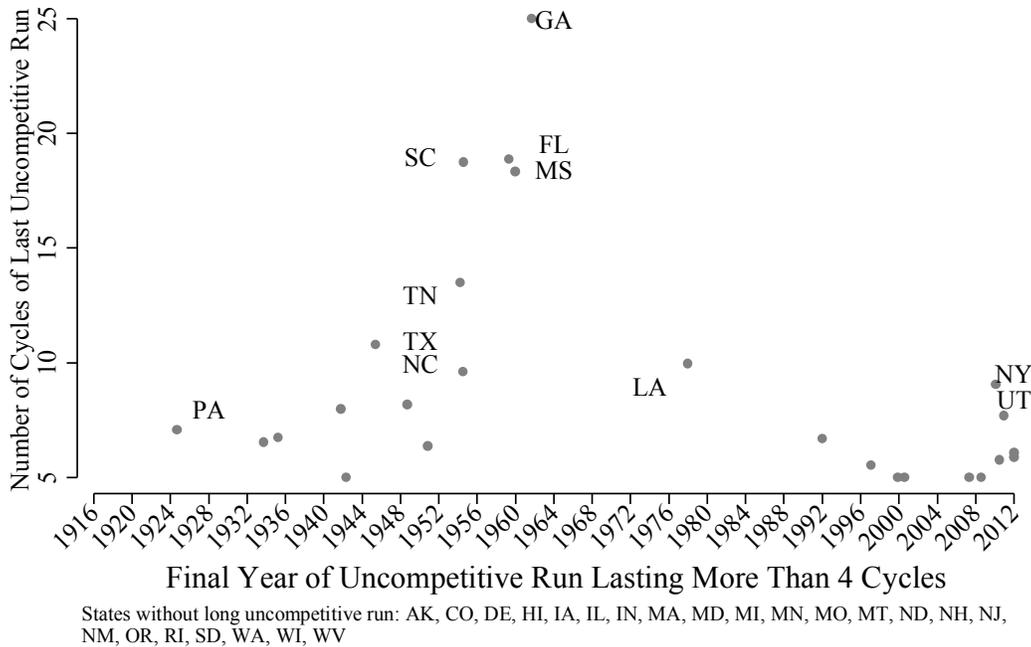
At this point, it is worth pausing to reflect on two questions alluded to above. First, is the observed level of competition different (i.e. higher) than the conventional expectation? While previous work does not provide a firm “baseline,” we would argue that the literature on individual-level American electoral behavior suggests far less competition than we see here. That is, if very few partisans defect or split their tickets (Jacobson 2014), if voters are geographically clustered (Nall 2015), if most incumbents win individual races and often do so with wide margins (Ansolabehere and Snyder Jr. 2002), then one might reasonably presume that most voters live in enclaves in which they will never see close contests. From this perspective, we think the fact that most voters regularly see at least some competition is a corrective to the conventional expectation.

Second, is the observed level of competition normatively good or bad? The precise answer to this question is also not firmly established in normative work. Yet, speaking generally, too much competition or too little competition could signal systemic problems. If voters see competition in all or almost all races, this suggests that politicians who perform well in office are not rewarded for their competence. With this perspective, too much competition may be a bad sign. On the other hand, if voters never see competition, this suggests that the electoral system is incapable of voting out of office inferior politicians or parties that inevitably arise within specific locations. Thus, we can only suggest avoidance of extremes in rates of competition: not too much and not too little. The data, for example that conveyed in Figure 7, is consistent with this principle.

Figure 9: Uncompetitive Statewide Runs (10% Margin), 1914-2012



Most Recent Uncompet. Run Lasting More than 4 Cycles



Note: Upper plot shows a histogram of each state's longest uncompetitive run. Lower plot shows each state's most recent run lasting more than four election cycles, for the 27 applicable states. Jittering is applied to show multiple dots in same location.

4.2 Statewide Races, 1914-2012

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

We count the number of consecutive election cycles in which a state saw no statewide race with a narrow margin of victory. We call this an uncompetitive run. The upper plot in Figure 9 shows a histogram representing each state's longest run during this fifty-cycle period. Note that odd-year gubernatorial elections are counted in the previous even-numbered year, to simplify the presentation. Most states are clustered in the range of 2 to 6 cycles. In fact, since 1914, about half the states have never once gone more than four election cycles without a 55-45 or closer contest. The distribution in the upper plot of Figure 9 also has a long tail. The tail indicates the few states that went for a long time without a close race of President, Governor, or Senator. We identify these states to show that they are all concentrated in the South. As is well-known, through most of the twentieth century, the white-only Southern electorate was solidly Democratic. Only the southern states went through a lengthy competitive drought. The rest of the states have never had such a run of uncompetitive elections. Even setting aside the many opportunities for competition in legislative elections, lower-tiered state races, primaries, and municipal contests, most states do not go very long without a close state contest.

In the lower plot in Figure 9, we focus on states that have had a run lasting more than four cycles. The y-axis shows the length of the state's most recent long run. Again, about half the states (N=23) have never had such a run. For each state with a long run, we plot the most recent run longer than four cycles. The year plotted is the final year of the run. Seven states (AL, KS, NE, NY, OK, UT, WY) were on a long run through the end of the time series

and are shown at year 2012. One of these states, Kansas, hosted close Gubernatorial and Senate elections in 2014. The other states are still on their uncompetitive runs. However, as we show in the previous analysis, several of those states have seen competitive house or state legislative races during the same time period.

To illustrate the interpretation of the scatterplot, consider Pennsylvania. The last time that Pennsylvania had an uncompetitive run lasting more than four cycles was an eight-cycle run that ended in 1928. Since 1928, Pennsylvania has never gone more than four cycles without a competitive statewide election. As in the top panel of the figure, the scatterplot also shows the very unusual period of the solid Democratic south. Aside from Alabama and Arkansas, none of the other southern states have had a run lasting more than four cycles since the 1970s. Since the time of post-Voting Rights Act black enfranchisement, the south has not been distinctively uncompetitive for statewide offices.

The broader lesson of this hundred-year analysis is that regular instances of competition are the norm. Except under the extraordinary circumstances of the old south, states have not typically gone long stretches without a competitive statewide race. Even just observing three statewide races, we see that the period of 2006-2012 that is the focus of the first part of our study is not unusual. For most states, like for most people, competitive elections occur frequently, just not always for the same office or at the same moment in time.

5 Competition and Representation

Perhaps the most important reason why electoral closeness matters is that it means that incumbent candidates and parties are not assured re-election. But in theory, electorates can see closeness without mixed partisan control. Recalling our fictitious example of a place where everyone is a partisan, always votes, and never defects, there would be some areas of the country with consistently close elections but where one party still dominates at all levels

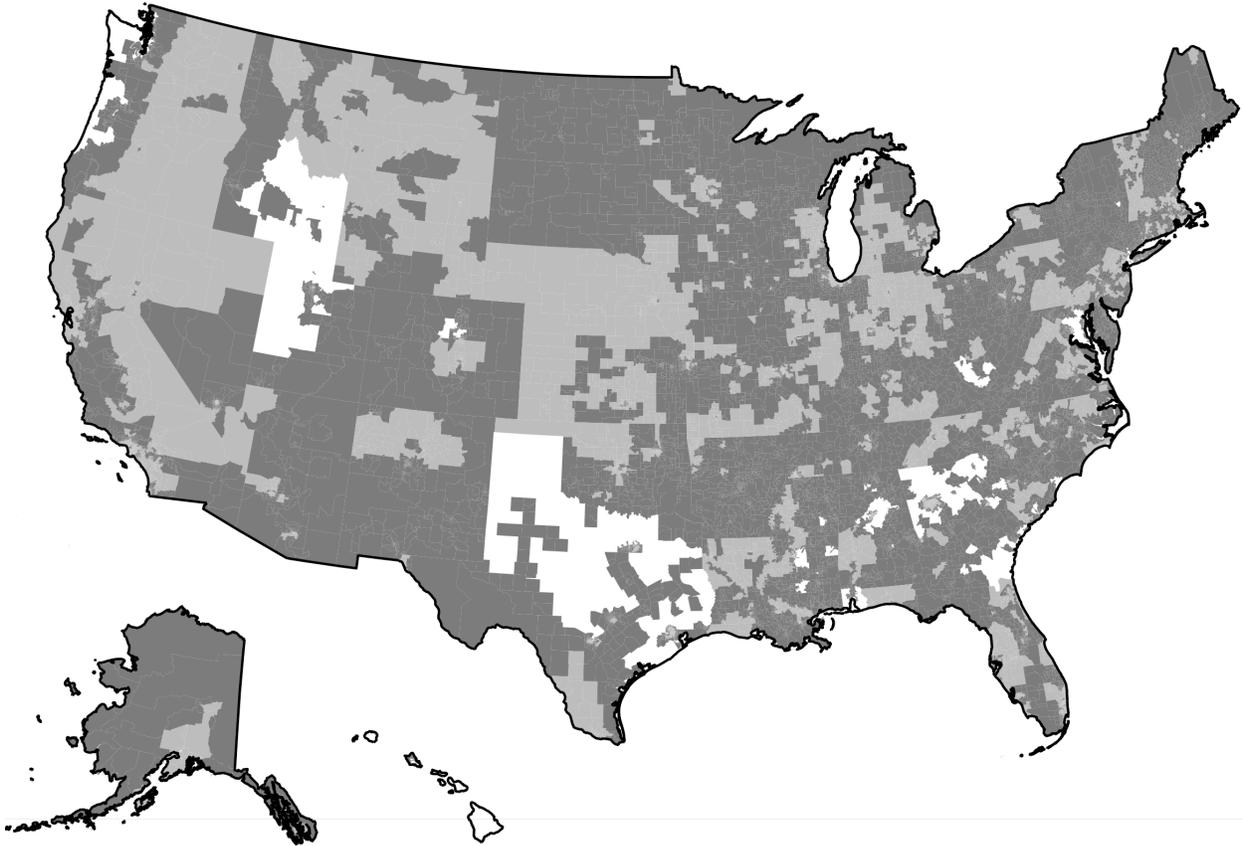
of office.

To examine this possibility, we extend the analysis of election results to account for variation in partisan control of elected offices. Drawing on the same data on federal, gubernatorial, and state legislative elections used to examine competition, we explore hierarchical, temporal, and geographic variation in partisan control by linking electoral jurisdictions to census geodata. Here, our central question is the extent to which the U.S. population lives in areas where one party controls all levels of office over the period from 2006-2012. Figure 10 visualizes this phenomenon.

Do we see large regions of the country that are competitive drought-lands, with one-party control at every level of office? In a word, no. For each of our non-intersecting polygons, dark gray indicates areas where mixed party control was observed at the state legislative or congressional district level during the time period. In these areas, adults were represented by at least one Democratic legislator and one Republican legislator for some period of time between 2006 and 2012. In light gray areas, voters were represented by a single party in the U.S. House and upper and lower statehouse chambers, but had a Senator or a Governor of the opposite party. As our anecdotes about Massachusetts and Alabama suggested, even the most “red” or “blue” states experience substantial partisan turnover.

The patterns we see in Figure 10 correspond to population counts, again based on the April 2010 Census enumeration. Eighty-nine percent of Americans lived in geographic units represented by both parties between 2006 and 2012, which corresponds to the 89% of Americans who witnessed a close election over the same time period. Only 5.4% of Americans are in jurisdiction where every office from state representative to Governor and Senator was held by Democrats between 2006 and 2012, and only 5.8% of Americans are in jurisdictions with complete Republican control. (Even among African-Americans, for whom jurisdictions are often required to be gerrymandered to be racially homogenous, 86% live in places that are represented by both Democrats and Republicans.) Note that in calculating all these num-

Figure 10: Geography of Mixed Party Control



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

bers, we ignore Presidential results, which are calculated at the state level but obviously do not imply that the state-level victor serves in office. Yet even if we ignore all statewide offices (light gray areas in Figure 10), the majority of Americans (54%) reside in jurisdictions that have seen a mix of representation in U.S. House and state legislative offices, either across years or offices.

The empirical fact that almost all voters are represented by both political parties in a short span in time is consequential. It is an enduring feature of the American Constitutional system promoted by the Founders. As Madison articulates in *Federalist 10*, both the division of power between federal and state governments and the extended sphere of the republic purposefully make it difficult for one faction to wholly dominate another. That both parties contest nearly the whole country and win offices across the country is a testament to Madison’s foresight.

In practical contemporary terms, representation by both parties across the country means that partisan voters, no matter where they live, have a like-minded partisan in some office that represents them. Recent field experiments have shown that voters prefer interacting with like-minded representatives and that representatives might even favor co-partisans in their responses to constituent service requests (Broockman and Ryan 2015). What we discover here is that most voters do actually have the opportunity to interact with a co-partisan leader. This may help to explain why politicians for many offices, including Governor, Senator, Representative, and state legislator all engage in similar constituent service activities. If a voter has a problem with a pothole, he or she may turn to many different offices for help — most of which are not directly responsible for fixing potholes, but are perfectly willing to demonstrate their commitment to hearing constituent concerns from their likely supporters. Even if a voter only would seek help from a politician of one party, she is almost always able to do so.

A second implication relates to an argument *against* political competition grounded in findings that “voters prefer to win elections” (Brunell 2008). Survey evidence indeed suggests that voters are more favorably disposed to legislative institutions when they had voted for the winner. Our evidence suggests that nearly all voters have recently voted for an eventual winning candidate, since nearly every voter experienced mixed party control. Some voters may lose more than others (Griffin and Newman 2008), but almost everyone wins at least

some of the time.

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

6 Conclusion

Scholars have long sought to understand the causes and consequences of *uncompetitive* elections. We aim to shift the debate to understanding the causes and consequences of the *competitive* electoral environment nearly all Americans experience. Frequent elections across many offices in different jurisdictions generate temporal, hierarchical, and geography variation in the locus of competition. In spite of high rates of partisan fidelity and elite polarization, American voters regularly experience competition. The high rate of competition is difficult to see if one only investigates a single office in a single year, but comes into clear focus when one takes a broader view. About 90% of Americans saw a competitive election between 2006 and 2012. About half of the states have never in a century gone more than 4 election cycles without a competitive statewide election. Our analysis further demonstrates that frequent, dispersed competition translates into mixed partisan control. In a recent period of six years, 90% of Americans were represented by both parties in at least one major office in at least one cycle.

Our results have important implications for scholarly research and for public policy. For researchers, our analysis yields a clear question for future work: why is there so *much* competition? The level of competition we uncover is quite incongruous with conventional

views of voting behavior. We have laid out a number of mechanisms suggested by the literature: candidates appeal to the median voter; nationalization causes temporal variation in the locus of competition; office-specific features cause different levels of competition for different offices in the same electorate. Some combination of variations in turnout and split-ticket voting also leads to variation in competition. But these various mechanisms are not well sorted or causally identified in the literature. By analyzing how the same voters behave at different points in time and in elections for different offices, scholars can better assess why competition appears in so many different electoral contexts. In our opinion, such studies will be a fruitful next step in this research agenda.

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

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