Constituency Size and Incumbent Safety: A Reexamination

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Existing literature suggests that, if anything, larger constituencies make reelection more challenging for legislative incumbents. Yet theoretical arguments commonly are unclear about why more populous constituencies should disadvantage incumbents relative to challengers. Additionally, most empirical research has focused on congressional races, none of which involve small populations. I argue that there is good reason to believe that smaller size enhances challenger viability and thereby lowers incumbent safety. I also provide an empirical analysis of the relationship between constituency size and incumbent safety, focusing on individual contests featuring an enormous variance in district population and other research advantages: races for positions as California county supervisors. Controlling for both candidate and demographic variables, and examining both likelihood of winning and incumbent vote percentage, I find that there is a modest but consistent positive relationship between constituency size and incumbent safety.

Various studies have considered the question of whether constituency size affects the reelection prospects of incumbent American legislators. Some scholars have found that larger constituencies produce more electoral losses for incumbents and/or lower victory margins (see especially Hibbing and Brandes 1983; see also Abramowitz 1988; Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000; Lee and Oppenheimer 1999, ch. 4,) Others have found a negligible or nonexistent relationship between constituency size and measures of incumbency safety (Black 1974; Krasn 1994: ch. 3; Westlye 1991: ch. 7: Bledsoe 1993: 142-43). To my knowledge, no empirical study has argued that larger constituency size enhances electoral safety.

Yet there is reason to be suspicious about whether previous research has captured the critical variance in the constituency size variable. Scholars generally have focused on elections to the U.S. Senate, taking advantage of the "natural experiment" created by the American Founders (i.e., the ability to compare electoral success rates for the same office across states of very different sizes). Such research has sometimes been bolstered by consideration of U.S. House races. Of course, Senate and House races are most important in terms of potential impact on public policy, and therefore intrinsically worthy of study. At the same time, in comparison to the electorates for other American legislative races (and indeed, legislative electorates in most other democratic countries), all of the congressional constituencies are quite large. Consider statewide congressional contests in Alaska and Wyoming, with populations of 627,000 and 494,000 in 2000, respectively. While sparsely populated in comparison to other states, Alaska and Wyoming have constituencies that vastly exceed in population the constituencies for virtually all American state and local electoral contests as well as the constituencies of other legislatures using the single district, first-past-the-post electoral system such as the British House of Commons, Canadian Parliament, Canadian provincial legislatures, etc. Alaska and Wyoming (and to a lesser extent many other states) are also quite dissimilar from other entities in terms of the unusual challenges they pose for interacting with voters in states with land masses of more than 570,000 and 97,000 square miles, respectively.

Methodologists generally recommend examining the full range of an explanatory variable to enhance certainty about causal inferences (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994: 215-16). Accordingly, it is desirable to examine American subnational elections to understand the impact of district size on incumbent safety. For example, as Carey, Niemi, and Powell (2000: 684) indicate, state legislative districts vary in size from a few thousand to hundreds of thousands of residents. Yet aside from the work by Carey and his colleagues, little systematic attention has been given to the effect of variance in district size at the state or local levels. Even in their study, district size is not a primary focus (such is also true of Bledsoe's otherwise thorough study of the determinants of incumbent safety in city council elections, which only considers the constituency size variable in passing; see Bledsoe 1993: 142-43). An exception is Black's 1974 study of San Francisco Bay Area city council elections, which offers a sophisticated theoretical analysis of the potential impact of constituency size on a number of electoral variables, including incumbent safety. But the empirical portion of Black's analysis is thin, relying on a dichotomous division of cities into "large" and "small" groups, in large part using perceptions of incumbent safety rather than actual results, and working with a sample with much less population variance than would have been available if elections from across California were studied.

In this study I reexamine the relationship between district size and incumbent safety, focusing on races for county

boards of supervisors in California. Information on such contests constitutes a rich source of data virtually untapped by political scientists. I argue that there appears to be a modest but consistent positive relationship between electorate size and incumbent safety for California county supervisors. In contrast to much other work I also contend that this empirical relationship is to be expected.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF FOCUSING ON COUNTY SUPERVISORIAL RACES

Since many readers are likely to be unfamiliar with the characteristics of county elections, it is helpful to consider in depth the pluses and minuses of concentrating on California supervisorial elections for a study of this kind. Such contests offer a number of prominent advantages. First, there is a wide range and enormous variance in the values of the independent variable. California's 58 counties range in size from tiny Alpine, nestled in the Sierra Nevada mountains and with a 2000 population of a little over 1,000 people, to enormous Los Angeles with a population of 8.863 million, exceeding the size of all but seven American states other than California itself (for county population data see California State Association of Counties/California Institute for County Government 2001). Supervisorial districts in turn contain anywhere from a few hundred people to over a million constituents, with a wide variety between the two extremes. While the average supervisorial district consisted of about 103,000 people in 2000, the standard deviation was fully 246,000 residents.

Second, many of the structural factors that might affect incumbency reelection rates are effectively controlled by comparing across California counties. All county supervisorial elections in the state are officially nonpartisan (party labels may not appear on the ballot), and existing literature suggests that in the vast majority of cases parties do not actually get involved in such elections.[1] County supervisors all serve four year terms. In the large majority of counties supervisors may serve an unlimited number of terms; only six counties have adopted term limits.[2] Pursuant to the default arrangement established in California law, 57 of the 58 counties (all but the combined City and County of San Francisco) use five member boards. Also pursuant to the default arrangement, 55 of 58 counties elect all supervisors on a district basis.[3] Following a series of U.S. Supreme

Court decisions in the 1960s related to apportionment of legislative seats, county districts must be roughly equal in population (the default arrangement is that district configurations are established by the board members themselves). Supervisors have similar legislative and administrative responsibilities in all counties (i.e., overseeing and regulating land use planning and municipal type services in unincorporated areas, approving the county budget, administering various required state programs, serving on various regional bodies, performing constituency services), although the impact and scope of their decisions obviously vary greatly (Lascher 1993a). In short, county supervisors across the state generally have similar jobs, compete for positions on boards of equal size, run as independent political entrepreneurs in their own districts, serve four year terms, and usually do not face term limits. By contrast, state legislatures differ substantially with respect to party competitiveness as well as institutional factors such as using single or multi-member districts and term length (Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000). This has benefits if one wishes to study the impact of a number of institutional features but complicates matters if one is concentrating on the constituency size variable.

Third, county supervisorial positions are politically significant in the Golden State. Interestingly, political scientists have deemed the work of California city councils sufficiently important to be the subject of book length studies of such topics as political representation and recruitment (Eulau and Prewitt 1973: Prewitt 1970), even though council positions are generally lower in the political hierarchy than are county board positions (council members commonly run for seats on the county board while movement in the other direction is rare). Additionally, supervisorial positions are often stepping stones to seats in the state legislature and elsewhere (Lascher 1993b).

Fourth, counties are commonly used as subdivisions for a variety of data collection efforts. Accordingly, a wide variety of demographic and other information is available for all counties, including the very smallest ones. Such data may be used as sources of control variables.

Fifth, due to the establishment of the California Elections Data Archive (CEDA) at California State University, Sacramento, in the 1990s, there is a single source of recent county election data available to researchers. Traditionally the lack of a statewide entity responsible for gathering local election data has been a major problem for scholars wishing to analyze such information in California and elsewhere. The creation of CEDA was intended to overcome that problem, at least in the Golden State.

Balanced against these advantages are a couple of disadvantages, although even these are tempered. Most notably,

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[1] In their book on California political parties, Owens, Constantini, and Louis F. Weschier (1970: 6) write: "Candidates for local office run without benefit of party label on the election ballot and have usually not been recruited, sponsored, or otherwise assisted by party organizations. In fact, they are usually reluctant to draw attention to their party affiliation in election campaigns for fear of alienating the independent-minded voter." Many others have commented on the weakness of local party organizations in California. ·

[2] Information about term limits was obtained from the California State Association of Counties.

[3] Suburban San Mateo County in the San Francisco Bay Area (population 718,000 in 2000) and rural Tehama County in Northern California (population 57,000) hold at-large elections for supervisors but require that candidates be residents of particular districts depending on the seat for which they're competing. The City and County of San Francisco (population 788,000) has alternated between using district and at-large elections; currently San Francisco uses district elections.

some potentially relevant information is unavailable. There is no ready source of data about the political or socioeconomic characteristics of supervisorial districts, in contrast to counties as a whole. While individual counties may gather and use such data to redraw supervisorial districts following the decennial census, the type and availability of such data is determined at the local level and is inconsistent across counties. Furthermore, there is no statewide organization that collects data on supervisorial districts (the California State Association of Counties serves primarily as a lobbying arm for county supervisors and county governments more generally). It is possible to gerrymander supervisorial districts within a particular county, and easily accessible information does not allow one to control for that.

Yet given the heterogeneity of counties, use of overall county measures may in part proxy for district characteristics. Consider the portion of white, non-Hispanic residents (a measure of ethnic diversity) in a county. California's counties include those that are under 30 percent and over 90 percent white. In the former, it is possible to draw a district that includes a relatively larger share of the white population. But it is highly unlikely that such a district will be as white dominated as those in counties where nine out of ten residents are white, non-Hispanics.

A related data shortcoming is the limited information available about supervisorial candidates. There is no depository of data about such candidates' campaign finances. Neither the State's Fair Political Practices Commission, which oversees compliance with California's campaign finance laws nor the Secretary of State's Office gather or store information about spending in local election campaigns. Additionally, there is no source of candidate information comparable to what the *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* provides about congressional candidates, and used to create sophisticated measures of challenger political quality (see especially Green and Krasno 1988). Nevertheless, the CEDA data are sufficient to establish incumbency status and develop a simple measure of challenger quality based on the challenger's ballot self designation.

A second disadvantage is that CEDA supervisorial election data are only available for the years 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2002 (supervisorial elections are almost always held in even numbered years, although in rare instances special elections may occur in odd numbered years; there were no such contests involving an incumbent for the period 1996-2002). This still allows consideration of almost 400 contests.

An additional consideration is that county supervisors (or commissioners as they are sometimes called outside of California) generally and supervisorial elections specifically are rarely studied by political scientists (Bauroth 2004; Lascher 1993b; Marando and Thomas 1977). In June of 2003 I conducted a full text search of major political science journals included in the electronic data base J-Stor. The search produced only 43 "hits" combining the terms "county supervisor/county commissioner" and "election" in the past two decades, in contrast to the hundreds of hits for congressional elections and scores of hits for city council

elections. Additionally, only a single study mentioning "California," "county supervisor," and "election" appeared in such journals during the entire 1980-1999 period, and that study focused on party platforms. The inattention to county elections is a disadvantage in terms of being able to build on directly related studies, but an advantage in terms of plowing new ground.

HOW MIGHT POPULATION AFFECT REELECTION PROSPECTS AND HOW SHOULD INCUMBENT SAFETY BE MEASURED?

"[E]lections are contests between two candidates. No senator or representative is actually in danger of defeat until someone runs against him or her. As a result, it is a mistake to assume that such conditions as the size and diversity of the population harm only the incumbent, for they also affect the challenger. In fact, given the imbalance of resources between incumbents and challengers, state size and diversity may frustrate challengers more." Krasno 1994:158.

Much of the prior work on the relationship between constituency size and incumbent safety stresses the potential difficulties created for incumbents by larger constituency size. In their seminal empirical study of the electoral success of U.S. senators from different sized states, Hibbing and Brandes (1983) refer to such factors as the challenge of personally interacting with voters, relative burden of reaching individuals through constituency service, and the greater heterogeneity of the voters themselves. Similarly, Abramowitz (1988: 387) argues that "[t]he larger the population of a state, the more difficult it may be for senator to cultivate the support of the voters[.]" And Carey, Niemi, and Powell (2000: 683) contend that district size is relevant to the reelection prospects of incumbent state legislators because it "affects the attention a legislator can give to individual constituents."

Yet as Krasno (1994) emphasizes that if constituency size is to be expected to influence incumbent safety, it is not enough to argue that larger size makes constituency relations harder for incumbents; it must be argued that larger size hurts incumbents *relative* to challengers. Existing literature is much less clear about why such a difference might exist, thereby supporting Krasno's skepticism. For example, while larger districts make it harder for incumbents to mingle with a significant portion of voters, this may be equally true for potential challengers. This is a point that is ignored even in Black's (1974) otherwise subtle analysis of how constituency size affects the potential for voter mobilization.

A similar argument might be made about the different benefits of holding a legislative position with a larger versus a smaller constituency, a topic that has received much less attention than the divergence in costs. At the subnational level, large sized districts commonly bring incumbents additional benefits in the form of higher salary, more staff, greater visibility for future electoral contests, etc. Consider again the case of California county supervisors. The

statewide average base compensation of $52,000 for county supervisors in 2001 (California Institute for County Government 2001) was relatively high for a local elective position. Yet board member salaries (ranging from a low of $12,000 in rural Modoc County to a high of $133,000 in sprawling Los Angeles County) tend to rise substantially as population increases. Additionally, supervisors in large counties are in a much better position to use their positions as springboards to the state legislature or to Congress. Increased size also brings larger budgets and bigger decisions, thereby enhancing supervisors' influence—although they also bring bigger problems and potential for disaster (it is worth noting that despite many years of shaky finances for counties across California, as of this writing only large, urban Orange County has ever been forced into bankruptcy). Indeed, at the high end of the population scale the attractions of supervisorial positions are such that they may exceed those of state and federal office. Thus Guerra (1993) argues that so great is the lure of Los Angeles supervisorial positions that they rank above positions in the U.S. House of Representatives in the Southern California political pecking order.

With larger size bringing such additional benefits and presumably creating a strong incentive for incumbents to maintain their seats, does it make sense to hypothesize that, contra Hibbing and Brandes, et al., population is positively associated with incumbent safety? The answer is: not necessarily. Relative to Modoc County supervisors, Los Angeles County supervisors should be strongly motivated to "work their districts." But Los Angeles board races should also prove disproportionately attractive to politically ambitious city council members, state legislators, community and business leaders, etc. Every additional size related benefit for incumbents might also serve as a motive for challengers to enter the race.

In short, absent a more compelling theoretical argument, increases in constituency size might simply be expected to have offsetting effects on incumbent safety. A larger constituency creates additional difficulties for challengers as well as incumbents. Enhanced perquisites commonly associated with larger size may attract challengers as much as they motivate current office holders.

Yet there is one extant line of argument that might make us expect differential impact of constituency size on challengers relative to incumbents: the literature on candidate viability. The vast general literature on incumbent safety has tended to emphasize that incumbents are "instantly viable" due to name recognition, opportunities for constituency service, access to campaign funds, campaign experience, etc. In contrast, challengers must fight to obtain viability (see for example Jacobson 1992). We might expect that this battle will be much easier for challengers in small districts relative to large districts. In small districts (i.e., those that are a fraction of the size of U.S. House districts), little money may be required to get one's names before voters, and advertising in the mass media (especially television and radio) may be unnecessary. It may be possible for a challenger to personally contact most constituents during an

election campaign. Any campaign organization may be small. Thus while incumbents should be viable in both small and large constituencies, challengers may have an advantage in obtaining viability in less populous districts. Other things equal, such a difference would be expected to lead to greater incumbent safety in large districts.

I am unaware of anyone else who explicitly makes this argument with respect to the relationship among constituency size, challenger viability, and incumbent safety. However, Bledsoe offers a similar line of reasoning in contending that at-large city council members may be safer than those elected on a district basis. He writes (1993: 139):

> The advantages of incumbency may be greater for at-large elected councilors because of the importance of name recognition in these citywide contests. Challengers need to invest substantial resources to overcome the public's established name recognition of incumbents, and many challengers may lack necessary resources. District-elected councilors, on the other hand, are more likely to be unseated by challengers because of the greater ease with which a challenger can mount a campaign within a narrow constituency.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Following the last points and against the grain of much of the existing literature, I hypothesized that larger constituency size would be associated with greater incumbent safety in California county supervisorial elections. This hypothesis was grounded in the observation that many county supervisorial districts are sufficiently small as to seemingly create a minimal barrier to challenger viability. Fully 16 of California's counties using district elections had supervisorial districts averaging fewer than 10,000 residents in 2000. It is feasible for a challenger (and certainly a small supervisorial campaign) to attempt to contact personally each household in such districts. By contrast, such a strategy is impractical in urban counties such as Fresno, Orange, and Santa Clara. To obtain viability in such jurisdictions a challenger would need to make substantial investments in direct mail, radio, and the like. A more sophisticated campaign aimed at obtaining the attention of local newspapers (which in larger cities may be following scores of congressional, state legislative, and local races as well as state and local ballot measures) may also be needed.

STUDY DESIGN

The unit of analysis for this study was the individual incumbent county supervisor seeking reelection. The most important data sources were the CEDA reports of local election outcomes. Such reports include the name of each contestant in each supervisorial race by district, candidates' incumbency status, candidates' official ballot designation (i.e., whether they referred to themselves as "incumbent," "county supervisor," "city council member," "mayor,"

"attorney," "county supervisor/farmer," etc.), and vote totals by candidate for the primary election and for the general election, if applicable (a general election runoff is required if no candidate receives a majority in the primary election; in rare instances a single election may be held in November if two or fewer candidates are running). I pooled this data for the years 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2002 for the 55 counties California counties consistently electing board members by district. A total of 385 contests were included in the sample. I obtained other county specific information from the State Department of Finance and *California County Fact Book* (California State Association of Counties/California Institute for County Government 2003).[4]

An initial question was how to make the dependent variable operational, as different indicators of incumbent safety have been used in previous research. Hibbing and Brandes (1983) used mean share of the two-party vote in general elections, reasoning that it was desirable to use a continuous rather than a dichotomous variable. Westlye (1991) considered a number of different measures while Carey, Niemi, and Powell (2000) and Krasno (1994) focused on reelection rates, arguing that the more important consideration was whether incumbents won or lost. Given the disagreement it seemed reasonable to consider multiple measures. I therefore examined both whether or not incumbents were reelected and incumbents' share of the total candidate vote (in the primary election if that was decisive for the incumbent and in the general election if one of the candidates was the sitting county supervisor).

The key test variable was constituency size. To measure this variable for logistic regression analysis (applicable to whether or not supervisors won reelection) I used the average district population in 2000. That is, I divided the total population in the county by five, since each county in the study had five supervisorial districts of roughly equal size. For ordinary least squares analysis (applicable to incumbent vote percentage) I used the natural log of the district population variable. Logarithms are appropriate because of the enormous variance in district size across counties and the potential of ceiling effects since many supervisors received over 90 percent of the vote. The analytical results are not substantially different if raw population figures are used instead of the logarithms. Note that an argument could be made to use the 1990 figures instead of the 2000 population data, since two of the election cycles considered were in the mid-1990s. Neither using the former figures instead of the latter nor averaging the two sets of figures significantly affected the empirical results.

Other research strongly emphasizes the importance of challenger quality for incumbent reelection prospects (e.g., Green and Krasno 1988). To control for the impact of challenger quality, I included a dummy variable indicating

whether or not one or more of the challengers included a self-designation as an elected official such as a member of the city council, member of a local school board, or state legislator. Other studies, including those pertaining specifically to local elections, have stressed that elective experience is a key indicator of a high quality challenger. For example, in his study of Chicago city council races, Krebs (1998) codes non-incumbents highest on his three-valued political experience variable if they are current of former officeholders. (He codes such people in the middle category if they were aides to officeholders, government officials, political volunteers, or former candidates. However, this information is not consistently available for California county supervisorial candidates.)

The number of candidates is also included as a control variable. Krebs (1998) emphasizes this factor as a key determinant of the share of the vote received by Chicago city council candidates. It should be noted that including number of opponents in a direct effects model may tend to understate the influence of the population variable. Following arguments made earlier about the ease of obtaining viability, population may influence the number of potential challengers willing to mount campaigns, and thus have an indirect effect on the dependent variable.

As suggested previously, there is no compelling expectation that any county demographic characteristics should have an impact on incumbent safety, because it is not clear how such characteristics would have a disproportionate impact on incumbents relative to challengers. Nevertheless, it is possible that other variables have such a disproportionate impact in ways that are not well understood. Accordingly, I included a number of county demographic control variables in my analysis. First, I used white residents as a percentage of total county residents in 1990. Studies of California politics (e.g., Baldassare 2000) commonly emphasize the importance of cleavages between whites and other major ethnic groups in the state (i.e., Asians, blacks, and Latinos). Moreover, other studies have used similar measures at the California county level as indicators of the heterogeneity of the population (see especially Tolbert and Hero 1996). It is possible that such ethnic heterogeneity makes it especially difficult for incumbents to please constituents and hold electoral coalitions together. Second, I used percentage change in the county population from 1990 to 2000. It may be that a rapidly changing population poses particular problems to incumbents because the constituents such officials expected to represent are different from the many constituents being added. Challengers meantime might be able to tailor their campaign to the new arrivers. Third, I used average land acres within a supervisorial district since that figure is readily available from the *California County Fact Book* and excludes water area acres under a county's jurisdiction. Regardless of population, geographically large districts may make it harder for challengers to obtain viability because they make personal contacts more difficult.

In the abstract it would seem desirable to control for the benefits of supervisorial office, despite the uncertainty about

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[4] A spreadsheet containing all the data used in the analysis is available from the author. The spreadsheet also contains notes regarding coding of ambiguous information for a few supervisorial races.

≡ TABLE 1
CHARACTERISTICS OF AND SOURCES FOR STUDY VARIABLES (N = 385)

Variable	Range	Mean	Standard Deviation	Source
Dependent Variables				
Incumbent % Share of Vote				
All contests	3-100	70.0	23.2	CEDA reports
Contested (N=255)	3-83.9	55.2	12.9	My calculation from races above
Reelected?	0-1	0.83	0.38	CEDA reports
Test Variables				
Average District Pop., 2000, in Thousands	0.2- 1,904	133	305	CSAC/CICG (2001) county population figures divided by 5
Natural Log of Avg. District Pop.	-1.6-7.6	3.5	1.8	My calculations from above
Control Variables				
Challenger Quality	0-1	0.10	0.30	CEDA reports
Number of Opponents	0-5	1.03	.985	CEDA reports
% White/Non-Hispanic in County	29-91	62.3	18.5	CSAC/CICG (2001)
% County Pop. Change, 1990-2000	-2.4-45.1	16.2	10.1	CSAC/CICG (2001)
Aerage Land Acres in District, in Thousands	57-2,568	361.9	406.4	CSAC/CICG (2001) county figures divided by 5

whether such factors disproportionately affect challengers or incumbents. However, there is strong reason to believe that population is causally prior to such variables as supervisorial salary. Much anecdotal evidence suggests that boards of supervisors set their pay with an eye toward supervisorial salary levels in other counties that are nearby and similar in size. This was apparent as recently as the fall of 2002. A review of newspaper articles about possible pay increases for board members in different California counties showed supervisors (and reporters) often looking toward salary levels in nearby, comparably sized counties (Faulk 2002; Firpo 2002; McHenry 2002; Nadeau 2002; Schultz 2002).[5] As further evidence, after being empowered to set supervisorial salaries by approval of a local ballot measure, the San Francisco Civil Service Commission explicitly considered number of constituents and payment levels in other counties (the Board authorized a near tripling of pay to bring San Francisco supervisorial salaries in line with those of other urban counties; see Gordon 2003). Thus any apparent impact of such variables as salary and staffing level in multivariate analysis is likely to be attributable to the indirect effect of county population. Accordingly, such variables are omitted from my empirical analysis.

Finally, I have included year-specific fixed effect dummy variables in my analysis, with 1996 the excluded value. This is consistent with the approach used by Lee and Oppenheimer (1999) in their multi-year study of the effect of state population on electoral victory margins in U.S. Senate races.

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[5] The review was made possible by my subscription to an on-line "clipping service" for county information prepared daily by the California Institute for County Government.

Table 1 summarizes information about the dependent, test, and control variables (other than the year dummies) used in my analysis. A quick review of this table shows that there is a wide range of values for each variable. It should also be noted that the absolute value of only one of the zero-order correlations between the independent variables exceeds .50 (a .63 correlation between the log of district population and the percentage of county residents who are non-white/non-Hispanic), suggesting that multicollinearity is not a problem.

FINDINGS

Incumbent California County supervisors commonly win a substantial majority of the vote, although they appear not to be quite as safe as typical state legislators or Members of Congress. For my entire sample, slightly more than 83 percent of supervisors were reelected, a figure strikingly in line with the 84 percent reelection rate for city council incumbents mentioned in Krebs' study (1998: 922). By comparison, Carey, Niemi, and Powell (2000) found that on average more than 90 percent of state legislators would be reelected in districts where selected characteristics lead to predictions of an election toss-up in open seat races. Incumbent California supervisors as an entire group received an average of 70 percent of the vote; incumbents in contested races received an average of 55 percent of the vote.

One obtains an initial sense of how population affects electoral safety by grouping supervisorial races according to average constituency size and showing the relationship to reelection rates. Figure 1 presents the results, with the sample divided by approximate population quintile, keeping

≡ FIGURE 1

PERCENT OF INCUMBENTS WINNING BY DISTRICT POPULATION QUINTILE
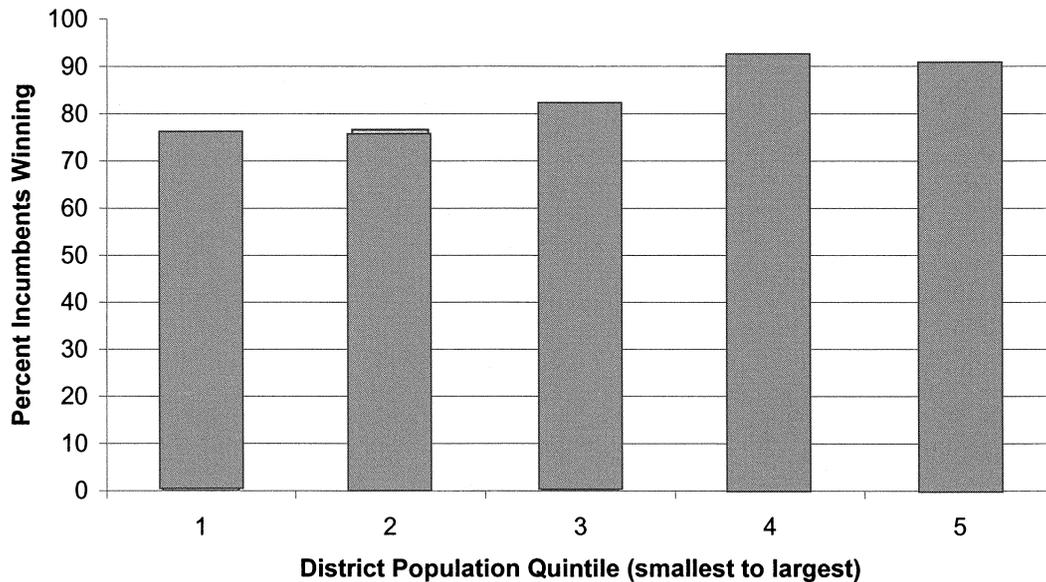
together races from any particular county. As shown in Figure 1, reelection rates were lowest in the two quintiles containing the smallest districts, with incumbent success hovering around 76 percent. In the middle quintile incumbent success was typical of the sample as a whole: while in the two quintiles containing the largest districts, incumbents electoral success exceeded 90 percent.

For my multivariate analysis (both the logistic regression and ordinary least squares regression portions) I examined three different models. Model 1 is the one I find most compelling, and includes data from all 385 races. Restricting the focus to the type of election most typical of those that determine the fate of incumbent supervisors, Model 2 considers only the 87 percent of races in which the incumbent's fate was determined in the primary election. Model 3 focuses only on the 66 percent of races in which an incumbent faced opposition. Consistent with my earlier argument, it is to be expected that supervisors from larger districts are more likely to be unopposed because of the high barriers to entry they create for challengers. There is in fact a significant positive statistical relationship between district population and running unopposed. Nevertheless, it is worth testing whether a relationship exists between constituency size and incumbent reelection prospects even in competitive elections.

Table 2 shows logistic regression results for models predicting the likelihood that an incumbent county supervisor would win reelection. The first column shows results for Model 1 (entire sample), the second results for Model 2 (primary election decisive for the incumbent supervisor), and the third results for Model 3 (incumbent faced one or more challengers). In all three models there is a modest but statistically significant, positive relationship between average district population and incumbent safety.

In the entire sample and at the mean probability for the dependent variable, an increase of 100,000 constituents in a district is associated with about a 7 percent greater likelihood of winning (.473*.83*.17), controlling for other variables (again, the likelihood of winning is high in any event). The equivalent percentages for Models 2 and 3 are 6 and 8 percent, respectively.

Table 3 presents ordinary least squares regression results for models predicting an incumbent's share of the vote. Again, I consider outcomes for the entire sample, elections in which the primary was decisive for the incumbent supervisor, and contests in which supervisors faced opposition. Examined any of these ways, greater population is associated with higher incumbent vote share and the coefficient is statistically significant. As shown in the first column, in the entire sample a one unit increase in the natural log of average district population is associated with a 2.2 percent increase in the percent of vote won by an incumbent supervisor, other variables held constant. For incumbents whose fate was resolved in the primary and those who faced opposition, the equivalent increases in incumbent vote share are 2.3 percent and 3.1 percent, respectively. To illustrate what these figures imply, consider the differences among Siskiyou (average district population about 8,800, natural log value about 2.2), Madera (average district population about 24,600, natural log value about 3.2), and Tulare Counties (average district population about 73,600, natural log value about 4.3). Model 1 indicates that an incumbent supervisor in Madera County should receive roughly 3.2 percent more votes than an incumbent Siskiyou County board member, other things equal. Meantime incumbent Tulare County supervisors should receive a little greater than 3.2 percent votes more than their Madera County colleagues.

≡ TABLE 2

LOGISTIC REGRESSION RESULTS OF WHETHER OR NOT INCUMBENT WON ON DISTRICT POPULATION AND CONTROL VARIABLES

Independent Variables	Model 1: All Races (N = 385)	Model 2: Primary Election Decisive (N = 334)	Model 3: Incumbent Facing Opposition (N = 255)
Average District Population in 100,000s	.480** (.197)	.528* (.255)	.453** (.200)
Challenger Quality	−.625 (.467)	−.834 (.659)	−.512 (.458)
Number of Opponents	−1.210** (.181)	−1.138** (.237)	−.865** (.203)
% White/Non-Hispanic in County	−.002 (.010)	−.003 (.013)	−.003 (.010)
% County Population Change, 1990-2000	.005 (.017)	.023 (.022)	.002 (.016)
Average Land Area in District, in Thousands	.000 (.000)	.000 (.001)	−.001 (.000)
1998 Dummy	.343 (.456)	.255 (.514)	.260 (.455)
2000 Dummy	1.270** (.444)	1.436** (.544)	1.145** (.436)
2002 Dummy	.096 (.415)	−.437 (.517)	−.040 (.418)
Constant	2.724** (.947)	2.424** (1.163)	2.250** (.956)
Nagelkerke R Square	.344	.285	.222
Cases Predicted Correctly (%)	84.7	88.6	77.6
−2 Log Likelihood	261.015	187.810	247.940

**$p < .01$, two-tailed test
*$p < .05$, two-tailed test

To illustrate further, consider what Los Angeles County supervisorial races suggest about the relative advantages of incumbency in large counties. From 1996 through 2002, incumbents won in all nine of the Los Angeles supervisorial contests in which a board member was seeking reelection. In six of these cases the incumbent supervisor was unopposed. In the remaining three races none of the board members faced challengers listing elective office in their ballot designations, and incumbents received an average of more than 75 percent of the vote. It seems quite plausible that the huge size of Los Angeles districts makes it hard to contest races and discourages challengers.

The results discussed thus far support my original hypothesis. But perhaps incumbents in larger districts are not intrinsically safer; instead, given the demands of seeking reelection in larger districts, the more vulnerable incumbents are relatively likely not to run. Given the above points such a scenario seems unlikely. However, Black (1974) raises this as a possibility in his analysis of city council races in the San Francisco Bay Area.

If weak incumbents are especially likely to "bail out" in large counties we would expect that the percentage of incumbents seeking reelection would be lower in those jurisdictions. This proposition is testable with available data by aggregating the individual results to the county level and regressing portion of incumbents seeking reelection on the log of average district population. Such an analysis does not support the notion that supervisors from large counties are less likely to run again. The coefficient for the population variable is in fact positive in this analysis, although not statistically significant.

To summarize, the effect of the constituency size variable is consistent across different model specifications, controlling for a variety of candidate related and demographic factors. Greater average constituency size is consistently associated with better results for incumbents.

<div align="center">= TABLE 3</div>

OLS REGRESSION RESULTS OF INCUMBENT VOTE PERCENTAGE ON NATURAL LOG OF DISTRICT POPULATION AND CONTROL VARIABLES

Independent Variables	Model 1: All Races (N = 385)	Model 2: Primary Election Decisive (N = 334)	Model 3: Incumbent Facing Opposition (N = 255)
Natural Log of District Population	2.158** (.517)	2.278** (.528)	3.102** (.528)
Challenger Quality	−8.048** (2.523)	−8.747** (3.097)	−6.229** (2.094)
Number of Opponents	−17.636** (.770)	−21.496** (.909)	−5.784** (.898)
% White/Non-Hispanic in County	.047 (.052)	.052 (.054)	.064 (.050)
% County Population Change, 1990-2000	.065 (.076)	.039 (.078)	.010 (.073)
Average Land Area in District, in Thousands	.004 (.002)	.003 (.002)	.000 (.002)
1998 Dummy	4.487* (2.198)	4.314 (2.237)	2.987 (2.085)
2000 Dummy	5.804** (1.930)	5.312** (1.985)	3.483 (1.799)
2002 Dummy	4.731* (2.086)	3.636 (2.166)	1.763 (2.014)
Constant	72.376** (5.210)	75.242** (5.341)	48.413** (5.087)
R^2	.641	.677	.275
Adjusted R^2	.633	.668	.248

**$p < .01$, two-tailed test
*$p < .05$, two-tailed test

DISCUSSION

The study results are compatible with the notion that it is easier to mount a serious challenge to incumbents in smaller districts, and that this makes such incumbents more vulnerable. Yet this proposition is in need of further testing, especially because some relevant information is not readily available for California county supervisorial races. If my argument is valid we would expect that the gap between knowledge about challengers and knowledge about incumbents would be wider in larger supervisorial districts. We might also predict a wider gap in types of campaign materials used in larger districts (since media campaigns are presumably more important in such districts, and incumbents would find it easier to fund such campaigns). If they were to be interviewed or surveyed, challengers (and incumbents) would be expected to differ in terms of perceptions about the ability to unseat incumbents based on whether they are from large or small counties. The proportionate campaign financing gap (i.e., the gap in amount of spending per capita) between challengers and incumbents may also be greater in large counties. However, cross-county information is lacking about voter perceptions of supervisorial candidates, candidate campaign activities, perceptions of supervisorial incumbents and challengers, and campaign finances. Such information is needed to take the next steps in investigating incumbent safety in supervisorial races.

It is also worth considering whether the apparent difference in incumbent safety across counties might be related to machine politics being more common in larger counties. Machine politics might create especially strong barriers to entry for challengers that are not related to the types of campaign effects I have emphasized. Investigating this issue would require a more systematic way of classifying counties in terms of the presence or absence of machine politics than is currently available.

Another interesting question is whether the relationship between constituency size and incumbent safety is affected by

nonpartisanship. Intuitively it is plausible that nonpartisanship enhances this relationship because incumbents in nonpartisan elections are less able to count on support from people who share their party identification. Conversely, any advantage from running as a challenger in a small district may be neutralized if the incumbent is running with a party label shared by most constituents. But empirical evidence from outside of California is needed to confirm this proposition.

The present study does not address many of the interesting questions about the relationship between incumbent safety and constituency size. However, my research does have two important implications. Given a suitably wide variance in district population, there is reason to expect that larger districts actually benefit incumbents seeking reelection, contrary to what much of the literature indicates. Additionally, my research suggests the need for refocusing scholarship. If we want to know more about the relationship between size and reelection prospects we need to reallocate some scholarly attention away from federal elections and toward subnational elections.

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