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Strategic Challenger Entry in a Federal System: The Role of Economic and Political Conditions in State Legislative Competition

Over a third of state legislators do not face challengers when seeking reelection. Existing analyses of state legislative contestation almost exclusively focus on the stable institutional features surrounding elections and ignore conditions that change between elections. I remedy this oversight by investigating how political contexts influence challenger entry. State legislators—particularly members of the governor’s party—more often face opposition during weak state economies, but the president’s copartisans are even more likely to receive a challenger when the president is unpopular. My findings suggest that both national- and state-level political conditions have an important impact on challengers’ entry strategies.

The threat of being thrown out of office is intended to pressure lawmakers to govern responsibly, but voters can only replace their representatives if there are alternatives to the incumbents on the ballot. American voters are nearly always provided an alternative choice to reelecting their president, governor, or member of Congress and therefore have the ability to remove these officials from power. However in 2012, Republicans reclaimed control of the South Carolina state house before a single vote was cast, as not enough Democratic candidates ran to secure a Democratic majority. Similarly in Rhode Island, 53% of state legislative seats only had a Democratic candidate, thereby deciding which party controlled the state legislature without any elections taking place.

With so few Democrats deciding to run for the state legislature in South Carolina and fewer Republicans in Rhode Island, it becomes difficult for voters to hold state legislators accountable for their policymaking. State legislatures pass 75 times as many laws as Congress, and to induce representative policymaking, median voter theories require at least a meaningful threat of a challenger (Downs 1957). Without

competition, legislators have less electoral incentive to take their constituents' interests into account as they consider legalizing gay marriage or enacting gun control reforms. Challengers play a critical role in the accountability process not only by providing alternatives to ineffective governments but also by bringing unrepresentative policymaking to the attention of voters (Arnold 1992). Understanding electoral accountability in American legislatures requires identifying the conditions under which incumbent state legislators face competition.

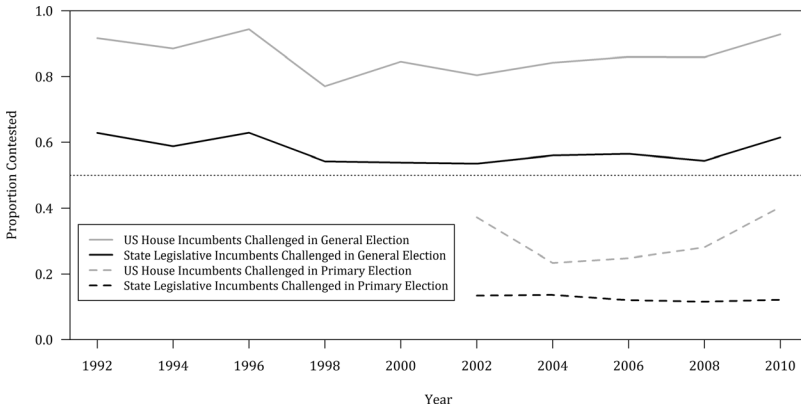
Political scientists know relatively little about how state legislative candidates take advantage of changing electoral circumstances. Prior work on state legislative competition almost exclusively focuses on cross-state differences and ignores the influence of changing conditions within a state. I know of no analysis that considers whether the strength of the economy relates to state legislative candidates' entry decisions despite findings regarding strategic challengers in congressional elections (Jacobson 1989). Neither federal nor state-level challengers enjoy losing, so it would seem plausible that state legislative candidates are more likely to enter races when the anticipated reactions of the electorate are conducive to winning. If candidates take advantage of favorable political conditions, the actual opportunities voters have to hold their representatives accountable will systematically differ as the contexts surrounding elections change.

To assess the extent to which these opportunities differ, I study how institutional and political contexts influence challenger entry in state legislative elections. I show that major party challengers are most likely to emerge during bad economies, and the relationship between economic growth and challenger entry is strongest for incumbents affiliated with the governor, particularly in professionalized legislatures. During economic downturns in less partisan districts, incumbents also more frequently face politically experienced opposition. State legislators affiliated with the president's party, meanwhile, are overall the most likely to face competition, especially during unpopular presidencies. State legislative challengers, therefore, appear to take advantage of both state and national political conditions for their personal electoral gain when deciding to enter a race, ultimately influencing voters' opportunities to hold state governments accountable on Election Day.

Challengers' Strategies in State Legislative Elections

Ideally, every incumbent would be challenged to give voters an opportunity to hold their legislators accountable for poor representation (Key 1966). The threat of a challenger can motivate legislators' behavior

FIGURE 1
Challenge Rates to Incumbents in the US House
and State Legislatures

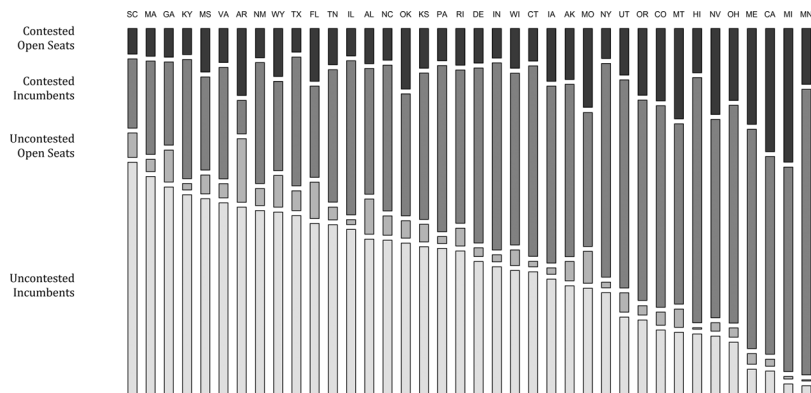


Note: Solid lines represent the proportion of US House (grey) and state legislative (black) incumbents who faced a major party challenger in elections from 1992 to 2010. The difference in rates in challenger entry in general elections is consistently greater than 20%. Dotted lines illustrate the rates in which state legislators face competition in the primary election. Over a third of incumbents did not face a challenger in either the primary or general election from 2002 to 2010.

(Arnold 1992), but citizens can only remove their representative from office if there is an alternative to the incumbent on the ballot. Voters however have relatively few opportunities to vote against their incumbent state legislator. Figure 1 presents the levels of competition in US House and state legislative races from 1992 to 2010. Rarely did more than 60% of state legislators face major party opposition (black solid line), a rate over 20% lower than that in US House elections (grey solid line). From 2002 to 2010, fewer than 20% of state legislators faced an in-party primary opponent (black dashed line), resulting in over a third of incumbents not facing a challenger in either the primary or general election.¹ In fact, Emile Bruneau, Jr. was “reelected” to the Louisiana state house without any competition for over 18 years. Voters in the 94th Louisiana state house district, therefore, had little chance to cast a ballot against their representative or Republican legislative party because no one decided to challenge Bruneau.

Bruneau is an extreme example, and the rates of challenger entry vary across the United States. Figure 2 illustrates the levels of contestation in states that exclusively have single-member state house districts. Every election year, over 90% of Minnesota state representatives face

FIGURE 2
General Election Competition in State House Seats, 2001–2010



Note: The above illustrates the proportion of contested or uncontested incumbent and open seats in state house elections from 2001 to 2010 by state. Proportions in each column sum to 1. Incumbents often do not face major party challenges in South Carolina or Massachusetts, but most Minnesota and Michigan state representatives face such challenges.

major party opposition and relatively few open seats go uncontested, but less than 30% of Arkansas legislators regularly encounter challenges. To explain this cross-state variation, prior studies focus on institutions, such as legislative professionalism (Hogan 2004; Squire 2000; Van Dunk and Weber 1997; Weber, Tucker, and Brace 1991), campaign finance laws (Hamm and Hogan 2008; Malhotra 2008; Mayer and Wood 1995; Werner and Mayer 2007), or term limits (Cain, Hanley, and Kousser 2006; Forgette, Garner, and Winkle 2009).² Despite providing a better understanding of differences *across* states, existing research does not explain variation *within* states from one election to the next.

Considering the sources of cross-time variation is important for assessing challenger behavior in state legislatures. For example, few institutions changed between the 2008 and 2010 elections but who entered state legislative elections did. In 2008, Republicans challenged less than 50% of sitting Democratic state representatives, but over 66% of Democratic incumbents were challenged in 2010. Meanwhile, the comparable rate of Republican incumbents facing opponents fell from 59% to 49% across these two elections. These differences in challenger entry likely were not random and partially explain the parties' successes in these wave elections.

Both federal and state legislative candidates often selectively choose when to enter races to maximize their probability of victory

(Canon and Sousa 1992; Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Maestas et al. 2006). Jacobson argues that congressional candidates strategically take advantage of a president's popularity and demonstrates that presidential approval correlates with the percentage of quality challengers in US House elections (Jacobson 1989: Table 3). This relationship suggests candidates anticipate presidential popularity will influence their own electoral success. For example, during an unpopular Republican presidency, Democratic congressional challengers will attempt to take advantage of the antipresidential sentiment to increase their likelihood of victory and be more likely to run. If Democrats adopt this common strategy, voters will have more opportunities to electorally sanction Republicans, thereby strengthening the relationship between federal parties' behavior in office and their members' probabilities of reelection.

The theory of strategic challengers most straightforwardly translates to the state level when thought of in the context of the governor and state legislature. Potential state legislative challengers may anticipate the governor's coattails influencing their own electoral success (Hogan 2005). Members of the opposition party then should be more likely to run when the governor is unpopular. By taking advantage of antigubernatorial sentiment, challengers' strategies not only increase their personal probability of victory but also connect the performance of the governor's party to its members' electoral security, promoting collective accountability at the state level.

A complication for the application of Jacobson's underlying theory of strategic challenger entry to state legislative elections is that state legislatures are embedded within a federal system. Federal and state candidates often share party labels, and there is repeated evidence that national politics can influence state-level electoral outcomes (e.g., Carsey and Wright 1998; Chubb 1988; Rogers 2013). Similar to riding gubernatorial coattails within a state, a potential state legislative candidate may anticipate taking advantage of an antipresidential wave. Watergate provides a possible example of candidates at the federal and state levels adopting a common strategy. In 1974, President Nixon's average approval rating was 25%, and consistent with Jacobson's theory, Democrats challenged all but one of the 165 Republican US House members who sought reelection. Voters then had many opportunities to hold the federal Republican party accountable. However, Democrats also challenged every Republican state legislator in over 50 state legislative chambers, well over twice the comparable figure for Democrats (Tidmarch, Lonergan, and Sciortino 1986). Democrats gained over 500 state legislative seats in 1974, so their entry decisions likely helped secure legislative majorities.

If a state legislative challenger considers both state and national conditions before deciding to run against an incumbent, the implications for accountability are unclear. As characterized by Jacobson (1989, 775–76), a congressional challenger who responds to national conditions promotes collective partisan accountability, as Congressmen have direct influence over the national government. State legislators' primary responsibility meanwhile concerns state policymaking, so if challengers systematically respond to national conditions, this does less to create incentives for representative lawmaking at the state level. A weak economy or an unpopular presidency may result in more state legislators facing opponents, but prosperous times or popular presidents could have the opposite effect and reduce competition. Incumbents then may foresee the ability to ride favorable national political conditions to unopposed reelection and pursue state policy goals with less fear of being held accountable through electoral punishment.

Jacobson's study of Congressional electoral competition focused on politically experienced or quality challengers' strategies, but it is important not to overlook the strategies of all challengers. Both politically experienced and inexperienced candidates are strategic (Banks and Kiewiet 1989; Canon 1993), and holding prior political office may be too coarse of an indicator of candidate quality, particularly in state legislative elections. In a 1995 survey, 46% of over 3,500 state legislators indicated they have never held prior elected office (Carey et al. 2000), and it is unlikely that all of these state legislators were not once quality opposition candidates. Furthermore, any challenger's entry decision can have implications for accountability. A state legislator can only lose their election if there is a challenger, and by casting a ballot for an opposition candidate, voters can electorally express displeasure for their incumbent's behavior. If a sitting state legislator only narrowly defeats an inexperienced candidate, it can signal weakness and promote future competition (Fenno 1978; Konisky and Ueda 2011; Krasno and Green 1988). Understanding accountability in state legislatures therefore requires understanding how political conditions influence both experienced and inexperienced challengers' decision making.

Despite challengers' strategies having important implications for accountability, it is relatively unknown if opposition candidates in state legislative elections take advantage of favorable political conditions. Prior work predominantly focuses on institutional variation across states without accounting for differences within states.³ No existing research considers whether changes within a state's economy have any relationship with challenger entry, and political scientists give little attention to the role of parties.⁴

To provide a fuller understanding of state legislative competition, I examine state legislative elections from 1991 to 2010. If state legislative candidates strategically try to maximize their probability of victory similar to their congressional counterparts, changing political contexts should influence their entry decisions and result in more incumbents facing challengers during unfavorable conditions. If challengers anticipate state-level conditions will have a greater impact on the electoral fates of the parties who control state government, the relationship between state economic growth and challenger entry should be stronger in races where a reelection-seeking legislator is a member of the governor's or legislative majority party. Support for this hypothesis suggests challengers' decision making gives voters more opportunities to hold state parties collectively accountable for actions taken in the state house. If state legislative challengers also take advantage of national political conditions, there should be a negative relationship between presidential popularity and the likelihood the president's legislative copartisans face challengers. Evidence for this hypothesis suggests that national politics also determine state legislators' electoral fates.

Empirical Analyses

To test these hypotheses, I study elections from 1991 to 2010 in 47 states.⁵ The dependent variable is whether a sitting state legislator—who survived the primary—from a single-member district received a major party opponent (Klarner et al. 2013; Shor and McCarty 2011). My study of state legislative competition first characterizes how differences across states and districts relate to challenger entry and then investigates the extent to which state legislative challengers strategically respond to dynamic political conditions. For clarity in presentation, analyses presented in the main text focus on general elections, but the appendix provides comparisons of primary and general elections (Table A-1).

Following previous investigations of competition in state legislatures, I evaluate how state legislatures' differing institutions and electoral rules relate to challengers' entry decisions. For example, legislative term limits were enacted partly to promote competition (Daniel and Lott 1997), but they potentially may have the opposite effect. Term limits signal when a state legislator will be forced from office, and with this information, some candidates may wait for an open seat instead of challenging the incumbent. Prior work additionally suggests a state legislature's professionalism influences the types of candidates who run for office (Fiorina 1994) and that leaders from legislatures with higher salaries are more involved in candidate recruitment (Sanbonmatsu 2006).

Each analysis, therefore, investigates how institutions such as term limits (NCSL) and a state legislature's professionalism (Squire 2007, 2012) relate to the likelihood an incumbent faces a challenger.⁶

Better salaries likely make serving in the state legislature more attractive (Squire 1988), but expensive races may deter challengers. To capture differentiating campaign costs across states, analyses of general elections from 2002 to 2010 control for the logged average amount of contributions to winning, general election candidates in a given year within a state (Bonica 2013). As campaign costs may vary across districts of different size, I additionally control for a legislative chamber's average district population.

My analyses also account for political conditions within the legislature and district. Since candidates likely do not want to be part of a meaningless minority party or face an unfriendly district (Stone and Maisel 2003), I control for the pre-election seat share of the minority party (Dubin 2007; NCSL), district's partisanship, and an incumbent's past electoral success. I measure partisanship using district-level presidential vote for the incumbent state legislator's party. For the 1991–2000 elections, I use Gore-Bush vote, and for the 2001–10 elections, I use averaged Bush-Kerry and McCain-Obama vote. The number of terms served by a legislator and his vote share in the most recent general election capture an incumbent's previous electoral success or potential vulnerability (Klarner et al. 2013).⁷

Prior work discovers little relationship between legislators' policy responsiveness and challenger entry, but the most comprehensive studies only examine two elections across less than a third of states (e.g., Hogan 2004, 2008). Recent advances in the estimation of public opinion along with newly collected data on legislator behavior, however, now provide the necessary measures to better understand the extent to which unrepresentative state legislators face competition across the country. To reevaluate the relationship between representation and challenger entry, I create a measure of a legislator's ideological distance from their district for legislators who served from 2002 to 2010. Specifically, I regress legislators' ideal points (Shor and McCarty 2011) on a measure of state legislative district ideology (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2013) and a party dummy. I use the absolute value of the residuals of this regression to create an ideological distance metric.⁸ If unrepresentative legislators are more likely to face competition, I expect the likelihood an incumbent faces a challenger to increase as a legislator's estimated ideological distance from their district grows.

I furthermore examine differences between elections. Following congressional findings that competition is lower in nonpresidential years

when there is reduced political interest (Wrighton and Squire 1997), statistical analyses control for whether an election occurred in the midterm (e.g., 2006 or 2010) or the off-year (e.g., 2007 or 2009).⁹ Prior work also finds legislative competition is greater immediately after redistricting (Pritchard 1992) or in non-Southern elections (Squire 1989). Each estimation, therefore, accounts for whether an election took place under these conditions (Dubin 2007).

To assess how challengers' decision making reacts to more dynamic political conditions, I evaluate how state economic performance or presidential popularity relate to state legislative competition. To measure economic growth within a state, I use the annual change in logged, real state personal income as measured in the second quarter. For national political contexts, I rely on the president's average approval rating in the Gallup poll from April through June of the election year. My focus on the second quarter of the election year follows studies of federal elections and aims to capture economic and political conditions for the approximate time period when many candidates decide to challenge an incumbent (Jacobson 1989, 779; Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell 2001: Table 2.7).¹⁰

If state legislative candidates' strategies are similar to their federal counterparts, I expect economic or political conditions' impact on entry decisions to differ by which parties controlled political institutions. To provide support for the aforementioned hypotheses, statistical analyses should produce stronger relationships between economic growth and the likelihood that challengers oppose incumbents of the governor's or a legislative chamber's majority party. If challengers take advantage of national political conditions, I expect for there to be a negative relationship between presidential approval and challenger entry for members of the president's party.

In my analyses, I also revisit prior findings regarding the role of larger political contexts in state legislative competition. Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman (2000) argue national conditions' impact on incumbent reelection is weaker in professionalized legislatures. To assess whether this finding is partly attributable to candidates' decisions to challenge the incumbent, I interact my measures of state economic growth and presidential approval with Squire's measure of legislative professionalism. If professionalism's mediating influence on national conditions occurs at the candidate entry stage, I expect the relationship between presidential approval and challenger entry to be the weakest in professionalized legislatures for members of the president's party.

No candidate enters a race hoping to lose, but the threat of accountability through an incumbent losing their seat is strongest in less partisan

districts. To investigate challengers' strategies in districts where their probability of victory is highest, I conduct three analyses that focus exclusively on districts where the incumbent's party received less than 60% of the presidential vote. First, I estimate the strength of the relationship between challenger entry and the economy in these districts. Second, I evaluate whether unrepresentative legislators are more likely to be challenged. Third, I assess the strength of state legislative candidacies in these districts by estimating the likelihood that a state senator faces a challenger who previously served in the state legislature (e.g., the state house). This final analysis is comparable to Jacobson's study of US House elections which focused on whether an incumbent faced a quality challenger—as indicated by whether the candidate held prior political office. If politically experienced candidates more often emerge during economic downturns, I expect for there to be a negative relationship between economic growth and the likelihood of an experienced challenger.¹¹

Given the dichotomous dependent variable of whether an incumbent receives a challenger, I use probit regressions to estimate the relationship between challenger entry and the above independent variables in each analysis.¹² To give substantive meaning to relationships, I convert probit estimates to average predicted probabilities or differences in probabilities across all observed values of the independent variables.

Cross State and District Influences on Challenger Entry

Figure 2 shows that the rates of challenger entry vary across the United States, and Table 1 provides evidence that this variation is partly attributable to differences across both legislatures and districts. Estimates in the first column of this table account for a legislator's ideological distance from their district and campaign costs from 2002 to 2010, and findings in the second column focus on a broader set of elections from 1991 to 2010.

Reflecting challengers' considerations of political conditions within the legislature, statistical analyses suggest a 10% gain in seat share by the minority party increases the predicted probability of a challenger by at least 2.5%, and providing evidence that challengers consider incumbents' dyadic representation, a standard deviation increase in the estimated ideological distance of a legislator from their district further increases the predicted probability of a major party challenger by over 5%. By more frequently opposing unrepresentative state legislators, challengers—who rarely “fail to sift through incumbents' records in search of the smoking gun” (Arnold 1992, 49)—give voters

TABLE 1
Challenger Entry as a Function of Institutional
and Political Contexts

Variable	General Elections: 2002–2010	General Elections: 1991–2010
Change Annual Log Q2 State Personal Income	–3.653* (0.545)	–3.026* (0.354)
Ideological Distance from District	0.477* (0.032)	
Logged Avg. Amt. to Win Race (State-Year Average)	–0.116* (0.023)	
Minority Party Seat Share	0.737* (0.115)	1.023* (0.079)
Professionalism	0.240* (0.118)	0.427* (0.083)
Southern Dummy	–0.570* (0.030)	–0.557* (0.022)
Logged District Size	0.150* (0.033)	0.049* (0.014)
Term Limits Enacted	–0.198* (0.026)	–0.121* (0.017)
Freshman Dummy	–0.066* (0.028)	–0.047* (0.019)
Terms Served	–0.014* (0.004)	–0.010* (0.003)
Incumbent Party Presidential Vote	–1.473* (0.086)	–1.263* (0.056)
Incumbent Previous Vote Share	–2.170* (0.128)	–2.422* (0.088)
Incumbent Previously Contested Dummy	–0.023 (0.047)	–0.071* (0.033)
Member of the Democratic Party	0.014 (0.021)	0.092* (0.014)
Midterm Election Dummy	0.094* (0.022)	–0.038* (0.014)
Off-year Election	0.147* (0.062)	0.031 (0.039)
First Election after Redistricting Dummy	–0.208* (0.030)	–0.012 (0.018)
State Senate Race	0.103* (0.031)	0.091* (0.021)
Constant	2.217* (0.207)	2.143* (0.142)
Log-Likelihood	–10303.564	–21447.21
N	17847	37096

Note: Probit estimates of the likelihood of a challenger contesting an incumbent state legislator. Analyses in the first column of this table focus on elections from 2002 to 2010 where measures of campaign fundraising and district ideology are available, and estimates in the second column reflect a broader set of elections from 1991 to 2010.

* $p \leq .05$. Standard errors in parentheses.

more opportunities to hold legislators accountable for their legislative behavior.

My analyses also reaffirm that variation in challenger entry is partly attributable to institutional features of state legislatures. State legislators, for example, from the most professionalized legislature (California) are at least 3.3% more likely to face a general election opponent than those from the least professionalized legislature (New Hampshire). Estimates in the first column of Table 1 additionally suggest that legislatures with term limits and more expensive campaigns have less competition.¹³ Challengers also unsurprisingly avoid unfriendly political constituencies. A standard deviation or 14% increase in presidential vote-share for the incumbent's party within a district reduces the predicted probability of a major party opponent by at least 5.5%, implying that challengers run in districts where they are likely to win.

Political and institutional conditions clearly influence challenger entry, but even extreme institutional arrangements do not make state legislative elections as competitive as those for Congress. The predicted probability that a challenger opposes a state legislative incumbent from the most professionalized legislature, where the minority party has 49% of seats, and represents a district where President Bush received 50% of the vote is still less than that for an average member of the US House. Only professionalizing legislatures or making more partisan balanced districts, therefore, may not be sufficient to increase state legislative challenger entry to the levels found in federal elections.

Challengers Responding to State and National Conditions

While the institutions surrounding elections differ little from one election to the next, a state's economy can change dramatically, and findings in Table 1 suggest that major party challengers react to these more dynamic conditions. Providing evidence for the hypothesis that some candidates strategically take advantage of favorable contexts surrounding elections, income growth of 2% in the second quarter of an election year reduces the likelihood of a general election challenger to an incumbent by approximately 2%.

Similar to their congressional counterparts, state legislative challengers appear to take advantage of economic downturns to challenge the parties in power. To present party-specific relationships, Table 2 provides analyses similar to those in the second column of Table 1 using data subset by the incumbent legislator's affiliation with the president's, governor's, or their chamber's majority party. Figure 3 illustrates the impact of economic growth on the average predicted

TABLE 2
Challenger Entry as a Function of Political Contexts Subset by Incumbents' Party

Variable	All Inc.	Pres. Pty.	~Pres. Pty.	Gov. Pty.	~Gov. Pty.	Maj. Pty.	~Maj. Pty.
Change Annual Log Q2 State Personal Income	-3.026* (0.354)	-4.018* (0.499)	-2.440* (0.518)	-4.709* (0.511)	-1.446* (0.504)	-3.177* (0.449)	-2.769* (0.581)
Q2 Presidential Approval		-0.012* (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)				
Minority Party Seat Share	1.023* (0.079)	1.077* (0.114)	1.035* (0.111)	0.819* (0.114)	1.267* (0.112)	1.217* (0.096)	0.798* (0.150)
Professionalism	0.427* (0.083)	0.478* (0.121)	0.369* (0.118)	0.720* (0.118)	0.123 (0.120)	0.410* (0.110)	0.450* (0.135)
Southern Dummy	-0.557* (0.022)	-0.526* (0.031)	-0.593* (0.031)	-0.455* (0.030)	-0.676* (0.032)	-0.583* (0.028)	-0.518* (0.035)
Off-year Election	0.031 (0.039)	0.102 (0.056)	0.010 (0.055)	-0.026 (0.055)	0.113* (0.055)	-0.019 (0.051)	0.102 (0.059)
Logged District Size	0.049* (0.014)	0.047* (0.020)	0.055* (0.020)	0.009 (0.020)	0.089* (0.020)	0.045* (0.018)	0.068* (0.023)
Term Limits Enacted	-0.121* (0.017)	-0.054* (0.025)	-0.174* (0.024)	-0.056* (0.025)	-0.186* (0.024)	-0.171* (0.022)	-0.037 (0.028)
First Election after Redistricting Dummy	-0.012 (0.018)	0.088* (0.035)	0.122* (0.032)	-0.044 (0.026)	0.020 (0.026)	-0.040 (0.023)	0.023 (0.030)
Freshman Dummy	-0.047* (0.019)	-0.091* (0.028)	-0.004 (0.028)	-0.083* (0.027)	-0.004 (0.028)	-0.058* (0.025)	-0.031 (0.031)
Terms Served	-0.010* (0.003)	-0.009* (0.004)	-0.010* (0.004)	-0.011* (0.004)	-0.008* (0.004)	-0.008* (0.003)	-0.014* (0.005)
Incumbent Party Presidential Vote	-1.263* (0.056)	-1.433* (0.081)	-1.105* (0.078)	-1.201* (0.078)	-1.438* (0.082)	-1.293* (0.071)	-1.346* (0.099)

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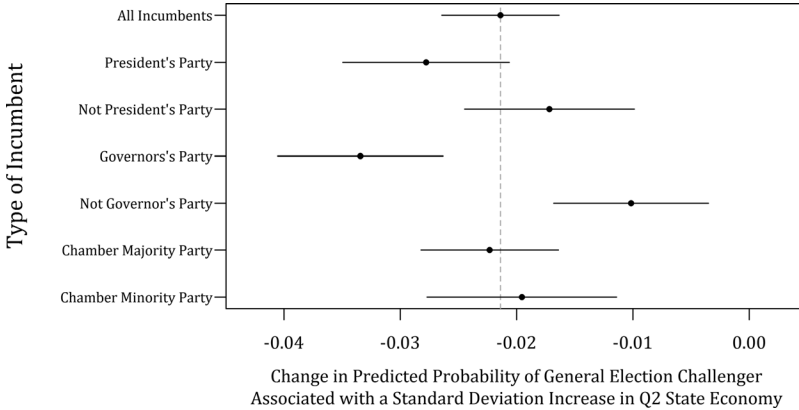
TABLE 2
(continued)

Variable	All Inc.	Pres. Pty.	~Pres. Pty.	Gov. Pty.	~Gov. Pty.	Maj. Pty.	~Maj. Pty.
Incumbent Previous Vote Share	-2.422* (0.088)	-2.363* (0.128)	-2.444* (0.125)	-2.766* (0.126)	-2.092* (0.125)	-2.432* (0.113)	-2.417* (0.144)
Incumbent Previously Contested Dummy	-0.071* (0.033)	-0.037 (0.048)	-0.073 (0.046)	-0.202* (0.047)	0.042 (0.047)	-0.068 (0.041)	-0.088 (0.055)
Member of the Democratic Party	0.092* (0.014)	0.245* (0.026)	0.018 (0.027)	0.011 (0.020)	0.178* (0.021)	0.101* (0.019)	0.048* (0.023)
Midterm Election Dummy	-0.038* (0.014)	0.082* (0.021)	-0.156* (0.021)	0.008 (0.02)	-0.084* (0.020)	-0.009 (0.018)	-0.082* (0.023)
State Senate Race	0.091* (0.021)	0.113* (0.031)	0.069* (0.030)	0.143* (0.030)	0.037 (0.031)	0.075* (0.027)	0.108* (0.035)
Constant	2.143* (0.142)	2.689* (0.206)	1.962* (0.206)	2.916* (0.206)	1.45* (0.199)	2.190* (0.186)	2.032* (0.234)
Log-Likelihood	-21447.210	-10544.116	-10718.747	-10578.977	-10801.793	-13216.749	-8181.716
N	37096	18736	18360	18241	18855	22891	14205

Note: Probit estimates of the likelihood of a major party challenger contesting an incumbent state legislator from 1991 to 2010. First column pools all elections, and subsequent columns provide estimates from data subset by the incumbent's affiliation with the president's, governor's, or their legislative chamber's majority party.

* $p \leq .05$. Standard errors in parentheses.

FIGURE 3
State Economy's Relationship with Challenger Entry

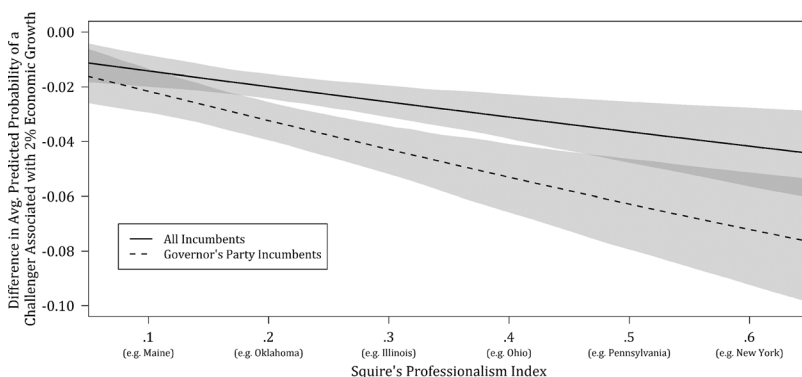


Note: The top circle and dotted grey line represent the change in average predicted probability of a major party challenger associated with a standard deviation increase in state economic growth for all incumbents, and other circles represent the probability increase for incumbents who belong to different political parties (Y-axis). Horizontal black lines are 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals. Economic growth of 2% decreases the likelihood of a challenger for all incumbents, but with the same improvement in economic conditions, the governor's legislative copartisans are over 2% less likely to receive a challenger than incumbents who are not members of the governor's party.

probability of a challenger for all incumbents (top circle) and members of different parties (other circles as indicated by Y-axis). Income growth of 2% reduces the probability of a challenger to members of the governor's party by over 3%, but comparable probabilities for legislators unaffiliated with the governor's party only fall by less than 1%. This difference parallels trends found in congressional elections and by running against the governor's legislative copartisans during less prosperous times, challengers strengthen collective accountability amongst members of the state parties.

Institutional features of legislatures interact in important ways with the dynamic effects the economy has on state legislative elections. Recall that Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman (2000) find that state legislative professionalism conditions the impact the economy has on state legislative incumbents' reelection rates, and part of this conditional relationship appears to be attributable to candidate decision making. To illustrate this relationship between challenger entry, the economy, and professionalism, I conduct an analysis similar to that presented in Table 2 but interact the state economy measure with Squire's professionalism index (Table A-2). I then calculate the difference in the predicted probability of a

FIGURE 4
 Predicted Impact of 2% Economic Growth on Challenger Entry
 under Different Levels of State Legislative Professionalism



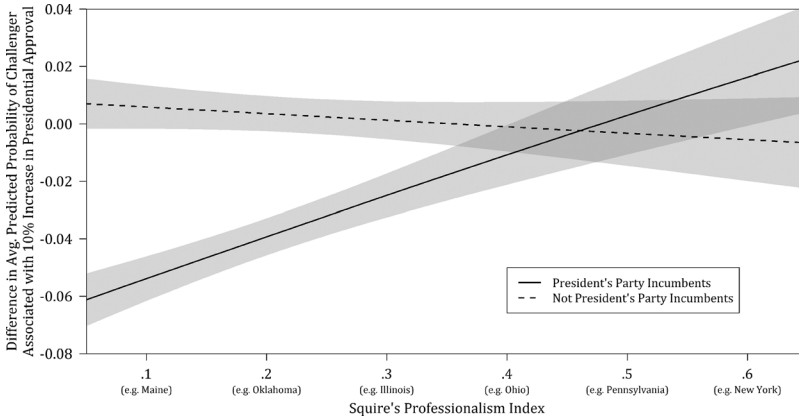
Note: The above illustrates the difference in the average predicted probability of a major party challenger associated with a 2% increase in state economic growth across different levels of state legislative professionalism (X-axis). Grey regions represent 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals. The solid line indicates that prosperous economies decrease the likelihood of a challenger for all incumbents, but this relationship is strongest for those seeking reelection to a more professionalized legislature. The dashed line illustrates that this conditional relationship is stronger for the governor's legislative copartisans. Probit estimates available in Table A-2.

challenger associated with 2% economic growth under different levels of state legislative professionalism. As illustrated by Figure 4, all incumbents are less likely to face opponents during prosperous times, but challengers' decision making appears most sensitive to the economy in professionalized legislatures (solid line), especially when the incumbent is a member of the governor's party (dashed line). For example, in the Maine state house, 2% economic growth results in approximately a 2% predicted decrease in the probability a copartisan of the governor faces a challenger. The comparable decrease in the more professionalized New York Assembly, meanwhile, is over 7%.¹⁴

Findings in Table 2 additionally suggest candidates account for national political conditions and are most apt to take on members of the president's party. The average predicted probability for any incumbent receiving a challenger is .57, but members of the president's party are 4.6% more likely to face opposition than those unaffiliated with the president's party, all else equal. This difference is greater than the comparable differences for either the governor's (-1.3%) or legislative majority parties (0.0%).

The president's legislative copartisans are additionally more likely to be challenged when the president is unpopular. A 10% decrease in

FIGURE 5
 Predicted Impact of a 10% Increase in Presidential Approval on
 Challenger Entry under Different Levels
 of State Legislative Professionalism



Note: The above plots the difference in the average predicted probability of an incumbent receiving a major party challenger associated with a 10% increase in presidential approval across different levels of state legislative professionalism (X-axis). Grey regions represent 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals. As of 2009, 45 state legislatures' professionalism index was less than .3, and in these types of legislatures, statistical analyses predict that a 10% increase in presidential approval reduces the probability of general election challenger by over a 2% for members of the president's party. Probit estimates available in Table A-2.

presidential approval increases the average predicted probability a member of the president's party faces a challenger by 3.7%. This relationship likely explains trends in state legislative competition during the most recent Bush administration. Following September 11th, President Bush enjoyed approval ratings exceeding 70% until the summer of 2002, and in the November election, approximately 51% of both Democrats and Republicans faced major party competition. However as Bush became unpopular, there were consequences for his state legislative copartisans. In each of the 2006 and 2008 elections, almost 60% of Republican state legislators faced a Democrat challenger, but most Democrat incumbents went unopposed.

Similar to the state economy, the influence of presidential approval varies across legislatures with different levels of professionalism. To illustrate this conditional relationship, Figure 5 is similar to Figure 4 but plots the predicted impact of a 10% increase in presidential approval on the probability of a challenger across different levels of state legislative professionalism. The increasing solid line implies that challengers'

decision making is less sensitive to national politics in states with more professional legislatures. Within the context of Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman's (2000) findings, the diminished influence of national conditions on incumbent reelection rates in professionalized legislatures appears to be partly attributable to candidate decision making.

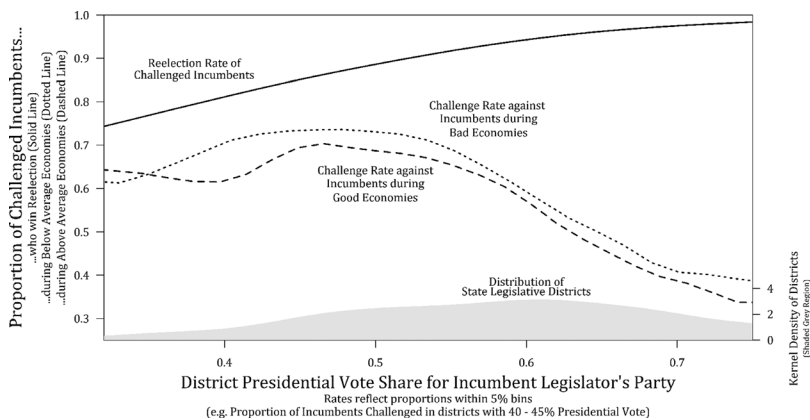
Together, Figures 4 and 5 suggest legislative professionalism increases the electoral impact of state conditions but mitigates the influence of national politics. However, only the Michigan, Pennsylvania, New York, and California legislatures are professional enough to effectively negate the influence of national conditions on state legislative challenger entry. National politics therefore has a dramatic and large effect on most voters' opportunities to hold their state legislator electorally accountable before any elections take place.

Challenger Entry in Competitive Districts

The above analyses provide repeated evidence that challengers take advantage of larger political conditions for their own electoral success, but these candidacies are less likely to unseat a state legislator if only electorally secure incumbents are contested. State legislators seeking reelection are often successful, especially in partisan districts. The solid black line in Figure 6 plots the raw data proportions of challenged incumbents who are reelected by district partisanship. Incumbents win 99% of the time in districts where their party received at least two-thirds of the presidential vote but only 87% of the time in districts where the incumbent's party received half of the presidential vote (black line). State legislators most often faced a major party challenger in these 50-50 districts (dotted and dashed lines), reflecting how prospective candidates must consider both the primary and general elections (Table A-1; Stone and Maisel 2003). In these districts, the raw data suggest challengers account for larger, dynamic political conditions. The dotted and dashed lines in Figure 6 indicate that 74% of incumbents were contested during below-average economies but only 68% were during above-average economies. This 6% difference is over twice as large as the comparable disparity for districts where the incumbent's party received two-thirds of the presidential vote and challengers have little chance of winning.

Table 3 provides more systematic evidence that state legislative challengers are strategic in districts where they can win. The analyses in this table focus only on "competitive districts" where the incumbent's party received less than 60% of the presidential vote. Recall that when examining all races, the predicted impact of 2% income growth on

FIGURE 6
Incumbent Challenge and Reelection Rates
by Partisanship of District



Note: Lines reflect reelection and challenge rates for incumbents across different types of districts. The kernel density plot (grey region) illustrates the distribution of competitive districts. Incumbents are overwhelmingly likely to be reelected (solid line), but they are most likely to receive challenges in districts where the incumbent’s party receives less than 60% of the presidential vote share, as indicated by the X-axis. This rate of challenges is highest during below average state economies (dotted line)—those with less than 3% income growth—as compared to good economies (dashed line).

challenger entry is 2.0%, but when only considering competitive seats, the comparative impact is 2.6% (Table 3: Column 1; t-statistic of difference is 1.68). Further suggesting potential challengers consider incumbents’ own performance, the relationship between legislators’ representation and the likelihood they face an opponent is stronger in these competitive districts. When considering all races, a standard deviation increase in the “ideological distance” variable increases the predicted probability a state house incumbent faces a major party challenger by 5% (Table 1: Column 1), but the comparable relationship in competitive districts is 7% (Table 3: Column 2; t-statistic of difference is 3.97). These estimated impacts of the economy and dyadic representation exceed that of a 10% change in district partisanship or two standard deviations change in state legislative professionalism.

Estimates in Table 3 also suggest that politically experienced, opposition candidates strategically take advantage of bad economies. Focusing on the quality of competition, analyses in the third column of Table 3 are similar to those in the first, but the dependent variable is whether a state senator faced a challenger with previous state legislative

TABLE 3
Challenger Entry in Competitive Districts

Variable	Economy	Representation	Experienced Challengers
Change Annual Log Q2 State Personal Income	-4.281* (0.502)	-5.569* (0.790)	-3.297* (1.528)
Ideological Distance from District		0.683* (0.048)	
Minority Party Seat Share	0.863* (0.113)	0.755* (0.165)	0.548 (0.357)
Professionalism	0.213 (0.117)	0.137 (0.166)	-3.232* (0.506)
Southern Dummy	-0.431* (0.032)	-0.455* (0.045)	-0.448* (0.114)
Off-year Election	-0.021 (0.053)	-0.042 (0.084)	0.224 (0.147)
Logged District Size	0.029 (0.020)	-0.024 (0.028)	0.189* (0.062)
Term Limits Enacted	-0.121* (0.024)	-0.232* (0.035)	0.111 (0.071)
First Election after Redistricting Dummy	-0.060* (0.025)	-0.280* (0.041)	0.008 (0.078)
Freshman Dummy	-0.027 (0.027)	-0.058 (0.041)	0.096 (0.085)
Terms Served	-0.011* (0.004)	-0.017* (0.005)	-0.012 (0.019)
Incumbent Party Presidential Vote	-0.518* (0.129)	-1.101* (0.201)	-2.096* (0.412)
Incumbent Previous Vote Share	-3.561* (0.135)	-3.213* (0.194)	-2.397* (0.520)
Incumbent Previously Contested Dummy	-0.615* (0.055)	-0.539* (0.079)	-0.652* (0.232)
Member of the Democratic Party	0.026 (0.021)	-0.133* (0.031)	-0.040 (0.068)
Midterm Election Dummy	-0.052* (0.020)	0.098* (0.032)	-0.018 (0.065)
State Senate Race	0.134* (0.030)	0.180* (0.043)	
Constant	3.404* (0.222)	3.693* (0.324)	0.087 (0.789)
Log-Likelihood	-10822.913	-5021.190	-927.324
N	19704	9216	4493

Note: The above analyses examine elections in districts where the incumbent's party received less than 60% of the presidential vote. The first column is similar to the second column of Table 1 and reflects the relationship between the state economy and challenger entry in these types of districts from 1991 to 2010. Analyses in the second column focus on elections from 2002 to 2010 and reflect the relationship between an incumbent's representation or estimated ideological distance from their district and the likelihood she receives a major party challenger. Estimates in the third column reflect the likelihood a state senator faced a general election challenger who previously served in the state legislature.

* $p \leq .05$. Standard errors in parentheses.

experience. Similar to findings concerning legislators' ambitions in US House elections (Berkman and Eisenstein 1999; Fowler and McClure 1990; see also Maestas et al. 2006) and membership stability in state legislatures (Squire 1988), state representatives look to move up less often in more professionalized legislatures, but candidates with legislative experience also appear "sensitive to the odds on winning" (Jacobson 1989, 775). State income growth of 2% decreases the probability a state senator faces an experienced challenger by 0.7%.¹⁵ For state senators of the governor's and president's party, the comparable decreases grow to 0.9% and 1.0%. Politically experienced state legislative challengers therefore appear to run against an incumbent more often when the political environment is favorable, and more importantly, these findings serve as evidence that challengers give voters viable alternatives to the incumbents who poorly managed the economy.

Conclusion

The above analyses demonstrate that state legislative candidates consider a range of factors that differ both across and within states before challenging an incumbent. Positioning themselves for electoral success, state legislative challengers appear to strategically contest unrepresentative incumbents and take advantage of the economy, particularly in districts where they can win. By contesting legislators who oversaw weak state economies or are not responsive to constituents' preferences, challengers' strategies promote both collective-partisan and individual accountability in state elections.

Challengers can strengthen electoral connections, but it is important to understand the consequences of these candidates' decisions. As described by Jacobson (1989), congressional challengers who take advantage of favorable national political conditions give voters more opportunities to hold the members of federal political parties collectively accountable for their management of the national government. My analyses, however, imply most state legislative challengers similarly respond to national politics. This strategy may improve challengers' electoral prospects, but if legislators recognize how national forces influence their elections, they could become less concerned about the electoral ramifications of their own state-level policymaking.

Some state legislators already recognize the influence of national conditions in state elections. After the 2012 candidate filing deadline, only 40% of Tennesseans approved of the president's performance, and Republican state house Representative Glen Casada claimed "[t]hat is the biggest thing working for us: President Obama and the anti-president

attitude” (Cass 2012). In terms of candidates emerging in Tennessee legislative elections, Casada was likely right. Democrats chose not to challenge Republicans in over a third of state house districts, implying Republicans only had to win 13 of 45 contested elections to retain their majority. Many Tennessee voters, therefore, had little opportunity to hold Republicans accountable for eliminating the estate tax or curbing collective bargaining.

The influence of national conditions in state legislative elections also has implications for how political scientists use states to study American politics. If elites in state legislative elections respond to national instead of state politics, how state politicians achieve their electoral goals presumably should differ from their congressional counterparts, and consequently voters’ choices in state elections will systematically differ from those in federal contests. Both legislative and electoral scholars, therefore, need to recognize and consider the differences between federal and state politics when developing and testing theories of American politics in the “laboratories of democracy.”

My analyses of challenger entry shed new light on how subnational candidates strategically consider both national and state political contexts before taking on incumbents. This district-level study of elite-level competition in state legislatures is the most thorough to date in terms of elections considered, but assessments of competition and accountability do not only concern the challenger. Incumbents are strategic themselves (Carson 2005; Cox and Katz 2002; Lazarus 2006), and the economy or president’s popularity could influence their decision to seek reelection. Multimember districts, the top-two primaries, or recall elections may also uniquely affect challenger entry, and future research should build on this and existing work to consider how political conditions relate to state legislative competition beyond the types of elections considered here. In any study of state legislative elections, it is, however, important not to lose sight of the patterns illustrated by Figure 1. Over a third of incumbent legislators regularly do not face any opponent, providing voters relatively few opportunities to hold their state governments electorally accountable.

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APPENDIX

To compare electoral competition in the primary and general election stages, I identified when an incumbent faced an in-party, primary challenger in the 2002–2010 elections using data from the National Institute for Money in State Politics. For elections not covered by the NIMSP data, I referred to Secretaries' of State websites.

Focusing on the general election, analyses in the first column of Table A-1—unlike those in Table 1—include cases where the incumbent lost their primary election. I also include cases where measures of district ideology (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2013) or legislative behavior (Shor and McCarty 2011) were unavailable. Analyses in the second column are similar to the first, but the dependent variable is whether an incumbent faced an in-party primary challenger. This study introduces a variable that captures the openness of a state's primary system. For clarity, I collapse primary categories into open and closed. Main findings are not sensitive to using more refined categories, as described in McGhee et al. (2014: Table 1).

Findings in Table A-1 suggest there are notable differences between out- and in-party challenger decision making. Freshman and southern legislators are more likely to face opposition in the primary election but less likely at the general election stage. Recall that general election challengers more often emerge in professional legislatures and those with sizable minority parties. The opposite appears to be the case in primary elections. At the district level, general election challengers appear less often in districts whose partisanship favors the incumbent. Again, the opposite is true in primary elections, and together, these two relationships reflect how challengers must consider both the primary and general elections (Stone and Maisel 2003). Unlike competition in general elections, there appears to be little relationship between the economy and whether an incumbent faces a primary challenger. Substantive conclusions regarding the economy are not sensitive to focusing on lower- or upper-chamber elections, levels of legislative professionalism, and district partisanship.

TABLE A-1
Comparison of Influences on Challenger Entry in Primary and General Elections

Variable	General Elections: 2002–2010	Primary Elections: 2002–2010
Change Annual Log Q2 State Personal Income	−4.127* (0.512)	−0.226 (0.637)
Minority Party Seat Share	0.931* (0.107)	−1.111* (0.141)
Professionalism	0.224* (0.110)	−0.709* (0.143)
Southern Dummy	−0.558* (0.028)	0.186* (0.036)
Off-year Election	0.030 (0.054)	−0.050 (0.062)
Logged District Size	0.043* (0.019)	0.056* (0.023)
Term Limits Enacted	−0.122* (0.023)	−0.223* (0.030)
First Election after Redistricting Dummy	−0.209* (0.027)	0.097* (0.032)
Freshman Dummy	−0.056* (0.026)	0.129* (0.032)
Terms Served	−0.017* (0.004)	−0.012* (0.005)
Incumbent Party Presidential Vote	−1.357* (0.079)	1.552* (0.099)
Incumbent Previous Vote Share	−2.215* (0.120)	0.521* (0.148)
Incumbent Previously Contested Dummy	−0.022 (0.044)	−0.031 (0.053)
Member of the Democratic Party	0.059* (0.019)	−0.191* (0.024)
Midterm Election Dummy	0.092* (0.021)	−0.055* (0.025)
State Senate Race	0.112* (0.029)	0.007 (0.035)
Closed Primary		0.044 (0.031)
Constant	2.169* (0.192)	−2.379* (0.238)
Log-Likelihood	−11742.925	−7218.283
N	20118	20118

Note: Probit estimates of the likelihood of a challenger contesting an incumbent state legislator. The first column focuses on out-party challenger entry in general elections, and the second column reflects the likelihood of an in-party challenger in primary elections.

* $p \leq .05$. Standard errors in parentheses.

TABLE A-2
Challenger Entry as a Function of Institutional and Political Contexts

Variable	All Inc.	Pres. Pty.	~Pres. Pty.	Gov. Pty.	~Gov. Pty.	Maj. Pty.	~Maj. Pty.
Change Annual Log Q2 State Personal Income	-1.090 (0.653)	-3.709* (0.931)	-0.035 (0.941)	-1.445 (0.924)	0.534 (0.941)	-0.866 (0.961)	-1.170 (1.297)
Q2 State Econ. X Professionalism	-9.252* (2.697)	-2.965 (3.933)	-11.522* (3.835)	-16.512* (4.010)	-9.418* (3.810)	-10.895* (3.847)	-5.627 (5.289)
Q2 Presidential Approval		-0.021* (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)				
Q2 Presidential Approval X Professionalism		0.044* (0.007)	-0.007 (0.006)				
Minority Party Seat Share	0.931* (0.077)	1.007* (0.111)	0.962* (0.108)	0.699* (0.111)	1.223* (0.108)	1.150* (0.111)	0.834* (0.172)
Professionalism	0.542* (0.109)	-1.770* (0.353)	0.919* (0.309)	0.951* (0.157)	0.329* (0.154)	0.813* (0.166)	0.494* (0.216)
Southern Dummy	-0.577* (0.021)	-0.549* (0.030)	-0.609* (0.030)	-0.485* (0.029)	-0.685* (0.031)	-0.594* (0.032)	-0.514* (0.039)
Off-year Election	0.053 (0.039)	0.114* (0.056)	0.031 (0.054)	0.011 (0.054)	0.126* (0.055)	-0.058 (0.060)	0.091 (0.072)
Logged District Size	0.085* (0.011)	0.086* (0.016)	0.084* (0.016)	0.064* (0.016)	0.105* (0.016)	0.069* (0.021)	0.097* (0.026)
Term Limits Enacted	-0.126* (0.017)	-0.073* (0.025)	-0.176* (0.024)	-0.066* (0.024)	-0.186* (0.024)	-0.160* (0.024)	0.000 (0.031)
First Election after Redistricting Dummy	-0.013 (0.018)	0.090* (0.034)	0.121* (0.032)	-0.042 (0.026)	0.017 (0.026)	-0.033 (0.027)	0.000 (0.034)
Freshman Dummy	-0.048* (0.019)	-0.088* (0.028)	-0.006 (0.028)	-0.084* (0.027)	-0.004 (0.028)	-0.029 (0.029)	-0.013 (0.035)

(continued on next page)

TABLE A-2
(continued)

Variable	All Inc.	Pres. Pty.	~Pres. Pty.	Gov. Pty.	~Gov. Pty.	Maj. Pty.	~Maj. Pty.
Terms Served	-0.010* (0.003)	-0.010* (0.004)	-0.010* (0.004)	-0.012* (0.004)	-0.009* (0.004)	-0.006 (0.004)	-0.017* (0.005)
Incumbent Party Presidential Vote	-1.270* (0.056)	-1.485* (0.082)	-1.144* (0.079)	-1.229* (0.079)	-1.433* (0.082)	-1.224* (0.08)	-1.472* (0.112)
Incumbent Previous Vote Share	-2.426* (0.088)	-2.407* (0.128)	-2.446* (0.125)	-2.778* (0.126)	-2.093* (0.125)	-2.464* (0.129)	-2.459* (0.163)
Incumbent Previously Contested Dummy	-0.070* (0.033)	-0.050 (0.048)	-0.072 (0.046)	-0.204* (0.047)	0.042 (0.047)	-0.078 (0.047)	-0.136* (0.062)
Member of the Democratic Party	0.095* (0.014)	0.252* (0.026)	0.016 (0.027)	-0.001 (0.021)	0.187* (0.022)	0.070* (0.022)	0.061* (0.026)
Midterm Election Dummy	-0.037* (0.014)	0.075* (0.021)	-0.152* (0.021)	0.011 (0.020)	-0.083* (0.020)	0.005 (0.020)	-0.109* (0.026)
Constant	1.826* (0.130)	2.905* (0.207)	1.618* (0.199)	2.430* (0.188)	1.263* (0.182)	1.874* (0.215)	1.855* (0.271)
Log-Likelihood	-21450.380	-10528.572	-10716.185	-10582.070	-10799.517	-10340.545	-6523.359
N	37096	18736	18360	18241	18855	17815	11253

Note: Probit estimates of the likelihood of a major party challenger contesting an incumbent state legislator from 1991 to 2010 while controlling for the interaction between the economy and state legislative professionalism. Similar to Table 2, the first column pools all elections, and subsequent columns provide estimates from data subset by the incumbent's affiliation with the president's, governor's, or legislative chamber majority party.
* $p \leq .05$. Standard errors in parentheses.

NOTES

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1. Over 75% of open state legislative races have candidates from both major political parties. Levels of state legislative competition have changed over time (Ray and Havick 1981). Van Dunk and Weber (1997: Figure 2) find over 75% of state house races were contested in 1972 but fell 10% by 1986. During this period, the rates of incumbents seeking reelection did not decline, were highly successful in primaries, and became less likely to be challenged in the general election (Grau 1981; Jewell and Breaux 1988, 1991).

2. Research is inconclusive regarding the immediate impact of redistricting. Weber, Tucker, and Brace (1991) discover little relationship between reapportionment and challenger entry, but Pritchard (1992) finds higher levels of contestation in Florida elections following redistricting in the 1970s. Conflicting findings may be attributable to the lack of attention given to redistricting principles (Forgette, Garner, and Winkle 2009). Prior work finds legislators representing majority-minority or partisan districts are less likely to be challenged (Hogan 2003, 2004, 2008; Squire 2000).

3. Investigating the role of legislators' behavior in 14 states, Hogan (2004, 2008) finds mixed results between incumbents' interest group ratings and whether they are contested. Weber, Tucker, and Brace (1991) discover income tax increases have no relationship with challenger emergence in 12 of 14 different states, but in a later study of all states, Van Dunk and Weber (1997) find that raising income taxes increases incumbent contestation rates by 2%.

4. Hogan (2004) includes a Democratic member dummy in his analysis of 1996 and 1998 elections and controls for whether a legislator was in the majority party (Hogan 2008). Of research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, only Tidmarch, Lonergan, and Sciortino control for party by presenting the percentages of uncontested seats by party (1986: Table 3).

5. I exclude chambers that have multimember elections. Excluded lower chambers are AZ, ID, MD, ND, NH, NJ, SD, WA, WV, VT, and sometimes NC. I also exclude the VT senate due to multimember districts; LA due to its run-off system; and NE because it is nonpartisan.

6. Squire's index accounts for differences in legislators' pay, staff, and length of legislative session. I assign 1986 professionalism scores to the 1991 elections, 1996 scores to the 1992–98 elections, 2003 scores to the 2000–06 elections, and 2009 scores to the 2008–10 elections.

7. My analysis is missing Gore-Bush vote for the NM Senate and the AR, CO, and MS state legislatures and Kerry-Bush vote for FL and MS.

8. The party dummy accounts for intradistrict divergence of Democrat and Republican legislators providing different representation to the same district (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2009). Findings are similar when excluding this variable. Bond, Covington, and Fleisher (1985) and Lascher, Hagen, and Rochlin (1996) also employ this type of residual, responsiveness measure, but it should be noted that this measure makes a potentially inappropriate assumption regarding the linear relationship between legislator and district ideology (Matusaka 2001).

9. Substantive findings are not sensitive to whether the governor is also seeking reelection.

10. Most state legislative candidates who responded to *The Legislative Candidate Survey* decided to enter races within five months of the primary (Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell 2001). For reference, 29 states held legislative primaries from June until August 2010. Since candidates may make decisions earlier or respond to national conditions differently across states, I conduct the main analyses using comparable measures from the first quarter of the election year and annual MRP estimates of state-level presidential approval. Substantive findings are similar. Findings using a national economic measure produce results consistent with those below, but the magnitude and statistical significance of party specific estimates are sensitive to the inclusion of the 2008 and 2010 elections. Results presented below are not.

11. Studies of congressional elections use prior political office as an indicator of candidate quality; it is important to recognize its limitations. Not all political offices “are of equal electoral value” (Squire 1992, 248), and as noted above, state legislative challengers may be of high quality but have never held prior office. To further investigate the strength of candidacies in state legislative elections, I conduct a separate analysis following Bond, Covington, and Fleisher (1985) using challenger fundraising as a proxy measure of “quality.” Challengers raise more money during bad economies, suggesting incumbents face higher quality campaigns during economic downturns, but this finding may reflect campaign donor strategies more so than an individual challenger’s quality and fundraising capability, as incumbents are also more successful at fundraising during strong economies despite presumably stable fundraising skills. This analysis only considers races where challengers decided to contest an incumbent and fundraising data was available from the NIMSP. All estimates available upon request.

12. General election findings do not change when comparing all incumbents seeking reelection and only those who survived the primary (Table A–1). Results are also similar when accounting for potential autoregressive errors in state-level least squares estimations where the dependent variable is the proportion of challenged incumbents. Party specific results are also similar when pooling data and including interaction terms for incumbent’s party membership.

13. The relationship between professionalism and challenger entry is approximately twice as strong in state house than senate elections. Estimates available upon request.

14. The comparable difference for chamber majority members is approximately 3%.

15. When considering all senate elections, the relationship between the economy and quality challenger entry is in the expected direction but statistically indistinguishable from zero.

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