

**Flipping the District: An Analysis of Voter Registration Trends and Public Opinion in a
Clinton-Republican Congressional District**

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Abstract

This project presents explanatory factors in the 2018 “flipping” of the 45th Congressional District of California. Represented by Republican Mimi Walters since 2014, the district had been named a congressional bellwether² with respect to a potential Democratic takeover of the House after the 2018 Midterm elections. After a lengthy ballot count, Democratic challenger Katie Porter defeated incumbent Mimi Walters 52.1% to 47.9%. Explanatory factors include: demographic and party registration change in the district, Walters’ lack of name recognition and job approval, Walters’ divergent issue positions from the majority of voters in the district, and quality challengers to the Representative of the once ‘safe’ Republican Congressional seat.

² See <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/which-u-s-house-race-is-the-best-2018-bellwether/> (accessed 4/3/18)

Flipping the District: An Analysis of Voter Registration Trends and Public Opinion in a Clinton-Republican Congressional District

For the first time since the Great Depression, the Democratic candidate for President, Hilary Clinton, won five percentage points more than the Republican candidate for President, Donald Trump, in the 2016 Presidential election. Sensing a potential shift in the electorate, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) established a western regional office in Irvine at the start of 2017 to work directly with challengers to the “California Seven”: House Republicans whose districts voted for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 Presidential election.³ Representative Mimi Walters, whose district included the Irvine office of the DCCC, was one of the California Seven.

Walters’ reelection to Congress in 2016 seemed to be by a safe margin, 58.6% to 41.4%.⁴ However, this margin was narrower than her initial election to Congress in 2014, when she won the then open seat 65.1% to 34.9%.⁵ Given the added attention of the national press and the Democratic party, the *Cook Political Report* reclassified Walters’ 45th Congressional District from *likely* Republican to *lean* Republican for 2018⁶. ***It is the contention of this study that the increased competitiveness of the seat was based upon four factors:*** 1. Demographic change and

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/democrats-house-california/527958/> (accessed 9/22/17).

⁴ <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2016-general/sov/26-us-reps-formatted.pdf> (accessed 3/27/19)

⁵ <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2014-general/pdf/43-congress.pdf>. Accessed 3/28/19.

⁶ Likely : These seats were not considered competitive one year before the election, but were seen as having the potential to become engaged; Lean : These were considered competitive races, but one party has an advantage. See: <http://cookpolitical.com/ratings/house-race-ratings> (accessed 9/19/17)

voter registration trends reflecting diminishing Republican registration in the district; 2. A lack of name recognition and approval of Mimi Walters; 3. A mismatch between the issue positions of Representative Walters and voters in the district, and; 4. The emergence of viable Democratic challengers (with strong financial backing) to challenge Walters.

I. Demographic Change and Voter Registration Trends in CA-45

The 45th Congressional District was redrawn after the 2010 census resulting in a geographically contiguous area reflecting shared socioeconomic characteristics. The redistricted 45th Congressional district includes the Orange County cities of Anaheim Hills and Orange to the North, Tustin and Irvine to the West, Rancho Santa Margarita to the East and Mission Viejo to the South. There are two universities and two community colleges in the district, with major technology employers such as Western Digital. When asked in an MSNBC interview before the Inauguration of Donald Trump whether her constituents were becoming more Democratic given Clinton’s victory in her district, Representative Walters answered that perhaps Trump’s message did not get to the district “as well as it should have.”⁷

Walters’ comments seemed to reflect a real lack of understanding of the sociodemographic characteristics of the district as well as changes in party registration since her initial election in 2014. Nationwide analyses of voter support for Clinton versus support for

⁷ See <https://www.msn.com/en-us/lifestyle/family-relationships/gop-rep-on-cabinet-picks-inauguration/vp-AAm22yi> (accessed 9/22/17)

Trump focused on education and race/ethnicity as significant variables associated with support for Clinton. According to the Pew Research Center, "in the 2016 election, a wide gap in presidential preferences emerged between those with and without a college degree. College graduates backed Clinton by a 9-point margin (52%-43%), while those without a college degree backed Trump 52%-44%."⁸ NBC exit polls showed Asian-American voters favoring Clinton 65%-29%.⁹ Based upon demographic trends in Walters' CA-45 district, in hindsight it should not have been surprising that the district would support Clinton and not Trump.

With respect to educational attainment (55% of residents in the District have attained a bachelor's degree or higher placing it in the top 5% of all Congressional Districts¹⁰), and income (the median household income in the district was \$102,040, placing it in the top 10% of all Congressional districts¹¹) the district is one of the most affluent and well-educated in the country. The percentage of the foreign born population in 2017 was 29.16%,¹² placing it in the top 15% of all Congressional Districts in terms of percentage of foreign-born population. With respect to race and ethnicity, 62.5% of residents in the district are White, 1.9% are African American, 18.74% are Latino, 23.99% are Asian-American, 0.18% are either Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 0.37% are American Indian or Alaskan Native, 6.31% are of "some other race" and 4.76% are of two or more races.¹³ An analysis of Census by Policymap states "Between 2000

⁸ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/behind-trumps-victory-divisions-by-race-gender-education/> (accessed 1/25/17).

⁹ <http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/president> (accessed 1/25/17).

¹⁰ source: Census, <http://proximityone.com/cd171dp2.htm>, accessed 3/28/19

¹¹ source: Census, <http://proximityone.com/cd171dp3.htm> (accessed 3/28/19)

¹² <https://www.census.gov/mycd/?st=06&cd=45> (accessed 3/28/19)

¹³ Source: Census data via <https://csun-policymap-com.libproxy.csun.edu/reports?type=b&area=custom&cpid=88865&name=CA%2045> (accessed 3/28/19)

and 2013-2017, the White population changed by +4.37%, the African-American population by 57.02%, and the Asian-American population by +101.65%. The number of Latinos in the district increased by 40.94% .¹⁴

Shortly before the first candidates emerged to challenge Walters¹⁵ in 2017, party registration in the district was: 39.6% Republican, 30.4% Democrat, 25.8% NPP and 4.2% Other party¹⁶. These percentages had changed since 2012 when the first election was held in the newly redrawn CA-45, and since Walters was first elected to the seat in 2014. Table 1 shows the changes in party registration from June of 2012 to June of 2018. Immediately apparent

Table 1: Party Registration in CA-45, 2012-2018

Date	Republican %	Democratic %	Non-Party Preference %	Other Party %
June 2012	44.70%	27.99%	23.28%	4.03%
June 2014	43.37%	28.19%	24.13%	4.31%
June 2016	42.25%	29.96%	23.88%	3.91%
June 2018	38.27%	30.65%	26.88%	4.20%
TOTAL CHANGE	-6.43%	+2.66%	+3.60%	+0.17%

Source: California Secretary of State Voter Registration Statistics (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/voter-registration/voter-registration-statistics>, accessed 3/19/19), calculations by author

is a 6.43 percent decrease in Republican party registration in the district from June of 2012 to June of 2018. The decrease in Republican party registration is partially offset by a 2.66 percent

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ <https://www.latimes.com/politics/essential/la-pol-ca-essential-politics-updates-third-challenger-to-rep-mimi-walters-1491497950-htlmlstory.html>. Accessed 3/28/19.

¹⁶ source: Orange County Registrar of Voters, Voter Registration File (3/23/17). Calculations by author.

increase in Democratic party registration, though the largest gains are to be found with respect to Non-Party Preference (NPP) voters, with a 3.60 percent increase. Analysis of voter registration data suggest that these gains are to be found among two distinct demographic groups: younger voters and foreign born voters.

With respect to age cohorts, analysis of voter registration data from March of 2017 showed clear and statistically significant differences. Table 2 reflects a breakdown of age cohort by party registration. More than half of all registered voters ages 66 years and older (50.8%) were registered Republicans, compared to 23.7 percent of registered voters aged 18-29 years.

Table 1: Age Cohort by Party Registration, March 2017

Age Cohort	Republican %	Democratic %	Non Party Preference (NPP) %	Other Party %
18-29 years	23.7%	35.2%	34.2%	6.9%
30-49 years	33.4%	30.1%	31.7%	4.8%
50-65 years	48.1%	27.6%	21.1%	3.3%
66 years and older	50.8%	30.5%	16.3%	2.4%
TOTAL	39.6%	30.4%	25.8%	4.2%
PERCENTAGE				

source: Orange County Registrar of Voters, Voter Registration File (3/23/17). Calculations by author.

In contrast, the largest age cohort to register as Non-Party Preference (NPP) was the 18-29 year age group with 34.2 percent, with only 16.3 percent of those in the 66 years and older age group registering as NPP. These differences in party registration by age group are statistically

significant,¹⁷ and should be considered a factor in explaining the overall change in party registration in the district over time. Demographic shifts in the district may also play a role.

Publicly available voter registration data does not contain racial or ethnic identifiers, but does indicate the birthplace of registered voters, making it possible to determine the percentages of voters in an area who are foreign born (and naturalized citizens) versus those voters who are citizens at birth. According to registration numbers from the Orange County Registrar of Voters in March of 2017, 74.7 percent of registered voters were native born citizens and 25.3 percent were foreign born, or naturalized citizens.¹⁸ Table 3 breaks down voters by citizenship and party registration. With respect to Republican Party registration, 44.0 percent of native born voters

Table 1: Party Registration of Native born vs. Foreign Born Voters, CA-45 March 2017

Party Registration	Native Born Voters %	Foreign Born Voters %	TOTAL
Republican	44.0%	26.4%	39.6%
Democratic	28.9%	34.7%	30.4%
Non-Party Preference	22.6%	35.4%	25.8%
Other Party	4.5%	3.6%	4.2%

Source: Orange County Registrar of Voters, Voter Registration File (3/23/17). Calculations by author.

were registered Republicans, compared to 26.4 percent of naturalized voters. For Democratic Party registration, 28.9 percent of native born voters are registered Democrats, compared to 34.7 percent of naturalized voters. In terms of NPP registration, only 22.6 percent of native born

¹⁷ Pearson Chi-Square=22237.111 (9 d.f.), p<.001.

¹⁸ source: Orange County Registrar of Voters, Voter Registration File (3/23/17). Calculations by author.

voters are registered as NPP, compared to 35.4 percent of naturalized voters. These differences were statistically significant.¹⁹

Voter registration rates in CA-45 have shown a decrease in Republican Party registration of more than 6 percent since the district was redrawn in 2012. Lower rates of Republican Party registration are seen in younger and foreign born voters. The electorate that would turn out to vote in 2018 would thus be very different than that which first elected Republican Mimi Walters to office in 2014.

II. The Missing Incumbency Advantage of Mimi Walters

In his seminal piece entitled, “Congressional Elections: The Case of the Vanishing Marginals,”²⁰ David Mayhew (1974) offers explanations for the decrease in competitiveness of House seats, and by extension, the advantage that incumbent representatives have when seeking reelection. This advantage is based on a variety of different benefits accruing to the officeholder.

²¹ A major component of this incumbency advantage is the increased name recognition that Congressional incumbents have when compared to challengers for their seats. Members of Congress, according to Mayhew, are able to advertise themselves and their policy achievements through official channels, such as Congressional franking privileges, and through popular

¹⁹ Pearson Chi-Square=12124.125 (3 d.f.), p<.001.

²⁰ Mayhew, D. (1974). Congressional Elections: The Case of the Vanishing Marginals. *Polity*, 6(3), 295-317. doi:10.2307/3233931

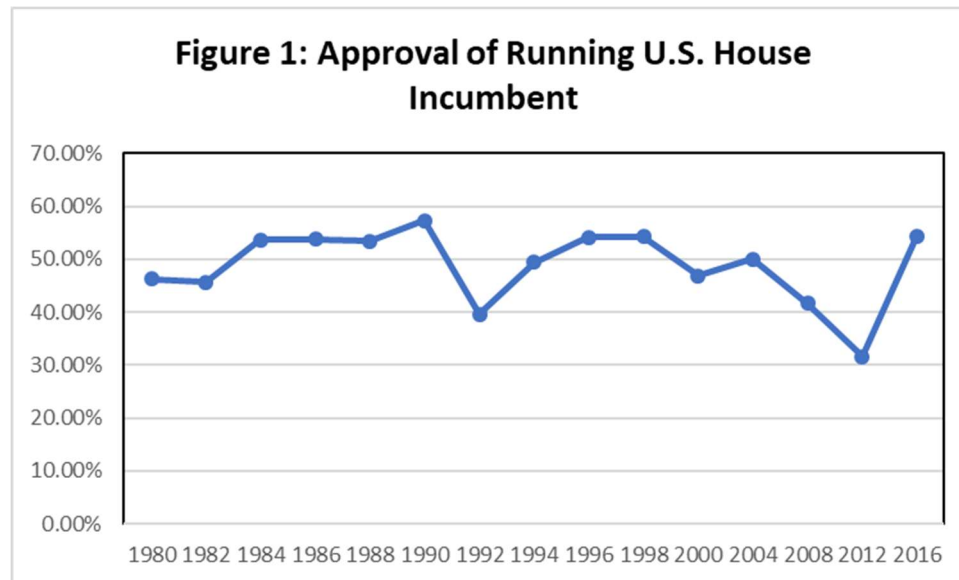
²¹ See Abramson, Paul R., John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde. 2012. *Change and Continuity in the 2008 and 2010 Elections*. CQ Press: Washington D.C.

channels such as television and mass media.²² Markus Prior (2006) writes that television, especially the rise of local television news broadcasts provided incumbent politicians the perfect medium to increase their name recognition among constituents, especially among those with lower levels of political information, who normally may not follow politics. The longer than an incumbent holds a seat, the greater this advantage becomes, and is increased further still with leadership positions and prominent committee memberships.²³ Along with higher levels of name recognition by their constituents, incumbents also tend to be viewed more favorably than challengers, especially given that "at least a plurality of the electorate in most districts will identify with the incumbent's political party."²⁴ Since 1980, the American National Election Study (ANES) has been asking survey respondents their level of approval of the House incumbent in their Congressional District running for re-election. The percentage of respondents

²² See Prior, Markus (2006). The incumbent in the living room: the rise of television and the incumbency advantage in U.S. House elections. *Journal of Politics*, (68), 657-673;

²³ Duquette, C., Mixon, M., & Cebula, F. (2013). The Impact of Legislative Tenure and Seniority on General Election Success: Econometric Evidence from U.S. House Races. *Atlantic Economic Journal*, 41(2), 161-172.

²⁴ Abramson, et. al. (2012): 245.



Source: The American National Election Studies, Time Series Cumulative Data File 1948-2016.

approving of the incumbent in their district has, with the exception of the election of 2012 been over 40% nationwide.

Estimates have been made with respect to what this incumbency advantage might translate into with respect to vote totals. Duquette, et. al (2013) calculated potential vote shares based on committee memberships, leadership positions, and longer terms in office; in 2018 Nathaniel Rakich calculated that two term incumbents had a net advantage of +2.8²⁵ percentage points. In the absence of scandal, an incumbent's time in office and accomplishments while in office, increased visibility to constituents through official means and through mass media appearances should increase the likelihood of their re-election. Even during time periods in which wave elections occurred, such as between 2004 and 2010, incumbents have had high re-

²⁵ See <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-much-was-incumbency-worth-in-2018/> (accessed 4/2/19).

election rates. According to Duquette, et. al., “incumbents seeking re-election during that period still managed, in winning 1,499 out of 1596 elections, to win 94% of the time against their general election challengers.”²⁶

Evidence from surveys undertaken by California45th²⁷, a non-partisan constituent group in CA-45, suggests that Walters lacked the name recognition at the start of 2017 that one would expect after being elected to two terms in office. One potential explanation for this was the absence of town halls or constituent events open to the public.²⁸ “Walters previously had held town halls, but as she sided with the Trump administration on issues such as health care, environment and taxes — and opposition to those positions grew in her district — she switched to telephone town halls.”²⁹ Walters’ lack of name recognition can be seen in Figure 2, which shows the results of surveys of registered voters in the district in 2017-2018. In the first half of 2017, less than 50% of survey respondents could correctly identify Mimi Walters as their Congressional Representative,³⁰ with 42.4% able to do so in April/May of 2017 and 37% in July

²⁶ Duquette, et. al. (2013): 170.

²⁷ California45th is a non-partisan Constituent group in the 45th Congressional District of California. The group has undertaken a series of public opinion polls using registered voter lists obtained from the Orange County Registrar of Voters. The group obtained voters lists dated: March 23, 2017, September 27, 2017, and; March 2018. From these voter lists researchers drew a random sample of 1% of the voters and contacted those voters who had telephone numbers associated with their voter records. Voters who did not have telephone numbers associated with their records but did have email addresses were sent email links to a SurveyMonkey version of the survey. Survey responses were weighted in each case according to party registration. For more details on the methodology associated with each survey, see <https://www.california45th.org/our-research>.

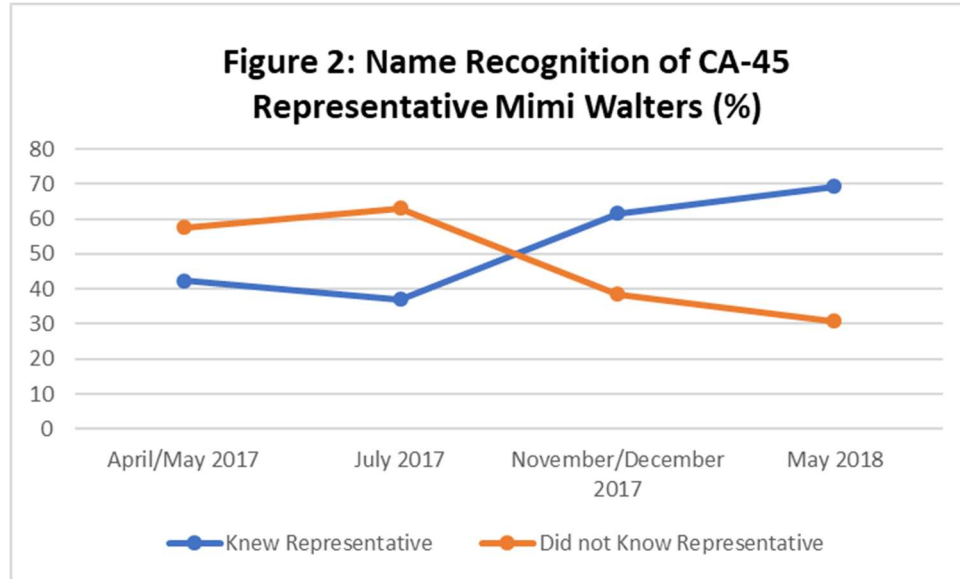
²⁸ <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/08/21/congress-town-halls-gotcha-public-meetings-789430> (accessed 4/13/19)

²⁹ <https://www.pe.com/2018/11/21/town-halls-helped-shape-the-midterm-will-they-in-2020/> (accessed 4/13/19)

³⁰ See:

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58a121de5016e17623852960/t/592746a85016e14f4ff75263/1495746217447/CA45_Public_Opinion_Poll_%231.pdf (accessed 4/4/19); and https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58a121de5016e17623852960/t/59a330976f4ca3e5e08897c2/1503867038093/CA45_Public_Opinion_Poll_%233.pdf (accessed 4/4/19)

2017. Walters’ name recognition increased in November of 2017 with 61.6% of registered voters able to correctly identify her as their elected member of Congress³¹, and 69.2% able to correctly identify Walters as their elected representative in May of 2018³², one month before the primary election.

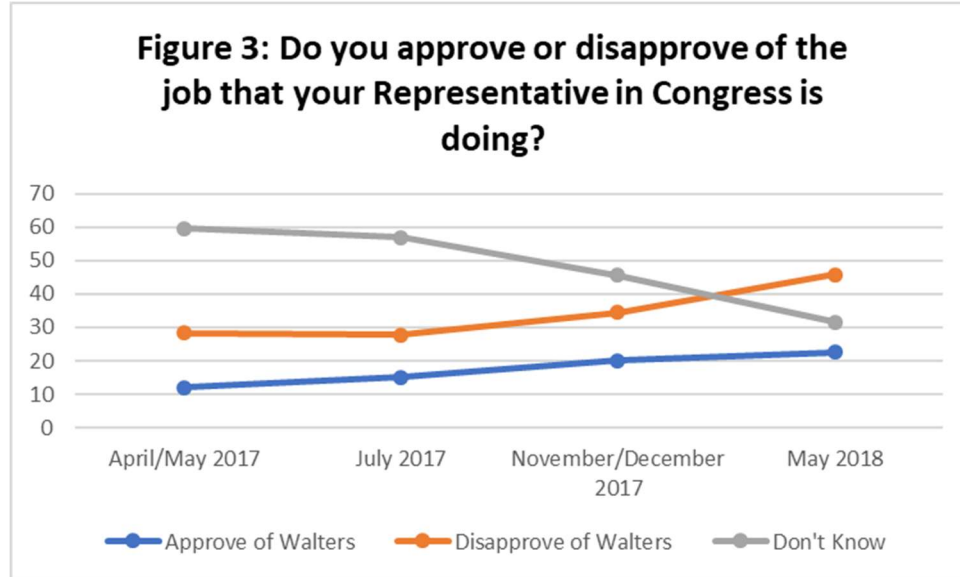


Source: California45th (<https://www.california45th.org/our-research>)

Walters’ increased name would make sense as the 2018 election year grew closer. Given the lack of town halls, and media coverage referencing her absence in the district, her low approval ratings are not surprising. In comparison to the ANES Times Series data (Figure 1), Walters’ approval ratings were much lower. In March of 2017, only 12.1 percent

³¹ See https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58a121de5016e17623852960/t/5a4d144e71c10b82b8e61de6/1515000920826/CA45_Public_Opinion_Poll_%235.pdf (accessed 4/4/19)

³² See https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58a121de5016e17623852960/t/5b156e15575d1f320ad2c38a/1528131095010/Primary+Election+Poll_June18.pdf (accessed 4/4/19)



Source: California45th (<https://www.california45th.org/our-research>)

of registered voters approved of the job Walters was doing, 28.4 percent disapproved , and 59.5 percent of registered voters responded they did not know or did not have enough information to evaluate the job Walters was doing. In July of 2017, the percentage of registered voters approving of the job Walters was doing was similar at 15.1 percent, 27.7 percent disapproved, and 56.8 percent responded they did not know or had enough information to evaluate her job performance. At the end of 2017, 20.1 percent of registered voters approved of the job Walters was doing, 34.4 percent disapproved, and 45.6 percent did not know or have enough information to evaluate the job Walters was doing. Even before the primary election, only 22.6 percent of registered voters approved of the job Walters was doing, 45.8 percent disapproved, and 31.6 percent of registered voters responded that they did not know or have enough information to evaluate the job she was doing.

Comparing Walters’ approval ratings to the ANES national surveys, Walters’ approval ratings as an incumbent were nowhere near national survey results. Even worse for Walters, it seemed that as her name recognition in the district grew so did her disapproval ratings. This may reflect her absence from the district, and the media coverage of her absence. Abramson, et. al. (2012) examined ANES data and concluded that because “approval rates tend to be very high for incumbents, most incumbents are re-elected by large margins, even in a difficult year for a party.”³³ Walters thus did not help her advantage as an incumbent by being invisible from the district. For independents, analysis by Abramson, et. al (2016) shows support is normally skewed sharply in favor of an incumbent. In a district with a sitting incumbent and a significant percentage of NPP voters, the demographic and partisan affiliation shifts in the district suggest a changed political landscape for Walters in comparison to her first election to Congress in 2014. An examination of public opinion on political issues in comparison to Walters’ legislative record provides additional context to changes in the district.

III. Issue divergence: CA-45 and Representative Walters

Party identifiers are more likely to vote for Congressional candidates from their own party, though over time incumbents have been more likely to attract party defectors given high levels of incumbent support.³⁴ Surveys of voters have shown that one of these most important things that voters want from their representative is a “member who reflects their views on the

³³ Abramson, Paul R., John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde. (2012) *Change and Continuity in the 2008 and 2010 Elections*. C.Q. Press: Washington D.C. pp. 279-280.

³⁴ Abramson, Paul R., John H. Aldrich, Brad T. Gomez, and David W. Rohde. (2016). *Change and Continuity in the 2012 & 2014 Elections*. Sage: Los Angeles.

issues, particularly salient national issues.”³⁵ Issue based representation is especially important for two groups of voters according to Lapinski, et. al (2016): partisans and those who are better educated. Using the 2015 Annenberg Institutions of Democracy (AIOD) survey, Lapinski et. al found that because issue representation was so important to voters, this made a “member’s position taking activities all the more important, ”³⁶ and, as a result made non-partisan activities more difficult for the Representative to engage in.

If voters in Congressional Districts were only partisans, this would be of little consequence, but in a district such as CA-45, with a significant percentage of NPP voters, the importance of issue representation matters even more. In their study of voters with ambivalent partisan attitudes, Basinger and Lavine (2005) found that in the absence of a reliance on partisan cues to guide their vote, “weak partisans and independents might be expected to rely more heavily on specific issues, ideology, (and) economic performance,”³⁷ and, especially in the case of partisan ambivalence, political knowledge. In fact, “only voters who are politically informed are capable of increasing reliance on the highly diagnostic, prospective criterion of ideology.”³⁸ With a high median level of education in the district as well as the significant proportion of NPP voters, the issue positions of Walters may have taken on a level of importance greater than in other Congressional districts. What were the issue positions of Representative Walters, and how did they compare to the issue preferences of voters in the district?

³⁵ Lapinski, John, Matt Levendusky, Ken Winneg and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. 2016. “What do Citizens Want from the Member of Congress?” *Political Research Quarterly* Vol. 69(3): 535.

³⁶ *ibid*, p. 544.

³⁷ Basinger, Scott T. and Howard Lavine. (2005). “Ambivalence, Information, and Electoral Choice.” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 99 (2): p. 171.

³⁸ *ibid*, p. 181.

On the two major legislative votes taking place during the 115th Congress, Representative Walters’ record in the 115th Congress included votes to repeal the Affordable Care Act (H.R. 1628)³⁹ and a vote in support of the Tax Plan passed by Congress (H.R. 1).⁴⁰ Voters in the district named Healthcare and the Economy as the most important issues facing the country, according to a pilot survey administered by the group California45th in March/April of 2017.⁴¹ The Economy remained the most important in July of 2017, followed by the President and political and social divisions in the country.⁴² A third public opinion survey undertaken in November/December of 2017⁴³ again named Economic Issues the most important issue, followed by the category of “Other” and the President. California45th also asked voters their specific opinions on these legislative issues. Figure 4 shows the results of a survey done by California45th in July of 2017 with respect to healthcare. The group compared national results from a Washington Post/ABC News poll to voters in the district. Although the Affordable Care Act was not as popular among district voters (42.8%) as it was nationally (50%), neither was the Republican alternative healthcare plan (20.7% in the district compared to 24% nationally). With respect to the Tax Plan passed by Congress (H.R. 1 “An Act to provide for reconciliation pursuant to titles II and V of the concurrent resolution on the budget for fiscal year 2018”),

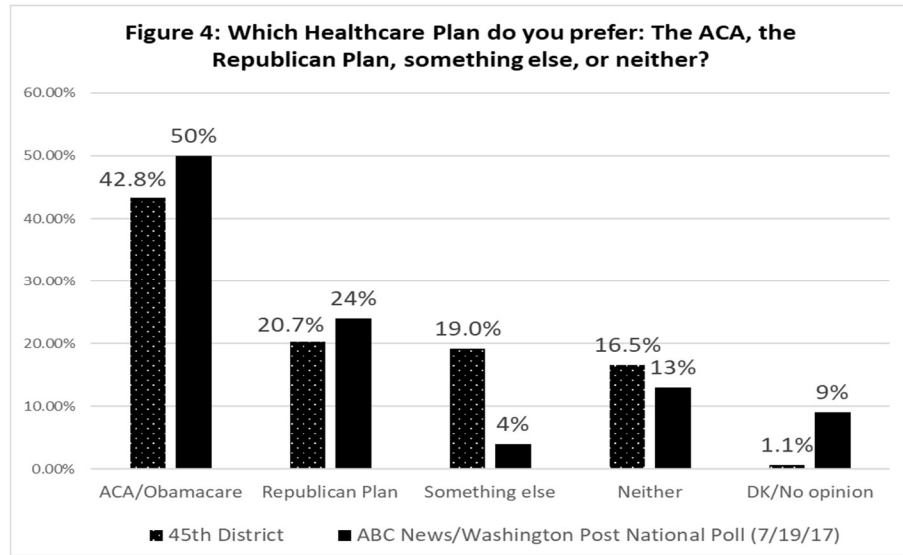
³⁹ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1628>

⁴⁰ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1>

⁴¹ https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58a121de5016e17623852960/t/592746a85016e14f4ff75263/1495746217447/CA45_Public_Opinion_Poll_%231.pdf (accessed 4/9/19)

⁴² https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58a121de5016e17623852960/t/59a330976f4ca3e5e08897c2/1503867038093/CA45_Public_Opinion_Poll_%233.pdf (accessed 4/9/19)

⁴³ https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58a121de5016e17623852960/t/5a4d144e71c10b82b8e61de6/1515000920826/CA45_Public_Opinion_Poll_%235.pdf (accessed 4/9/19)



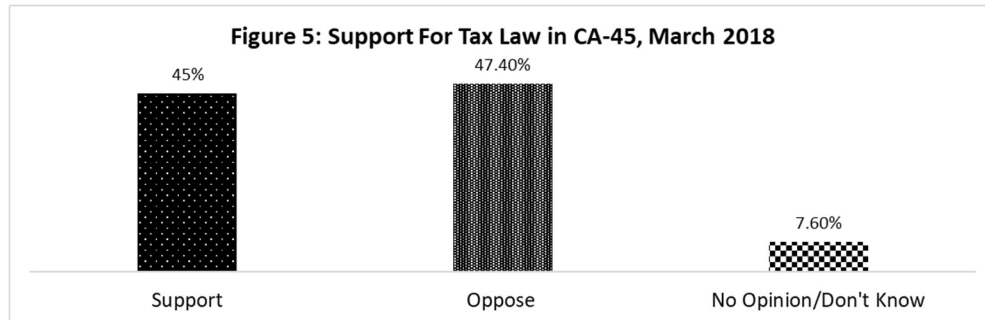
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California 45th surveyed registered voters both before and after the Tax Plan was passed. Results from the survey administered in March of 2018⁴⁴ showed less than a majority of registered voters (45%) supported the plan. Broken down by party registration, 77.6% of registered Republicans supported the tax law, whereas 78.7% of registered Democrats and 63.1% of NPP voters opposed the tax law.⁴⁵ Walters’ vote in favor of the tax bill contrasted with two of her House colleagues from Orange County, Darrell Issa and Dana Rohrabacher. In explaining his vote against the bill, Issa said, “Many in my area could face higher taxes under this bill...Californians have entrusted me to fight for them. I will not make the incredible tax burden they already endure even worse.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58a121de5016e17623852960/t/5ab170c688251b9ee898f32f/1521578183394/CA45_Public_Opinion_Poll%236.pdf (accessed 4/9/19)

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/politics/sd-me-smolens-issa-20171220-story.html> (accessed 4/11/19)



Source: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58a121de5016e17623852960/t/5ab170c688251b9ee898f32f/1521578183394/CA45_Public_Opinion_Poll%236.pdf

Repeal of the Affordable Health Care Act (ACA)⁴⁷ and passage of the Republican Tax Plan⁴⁸ were major legislative agenda items for the House Republican caucus. After Walters voted to replace the Affordable Care Act, “The Cook Political Report changed its outlook for 20 House seats because of the vote. That included changing the rating for Walters’...district from a “likely Republican” outcome in 2018 to “leans Republican.””⁴⁹ As the year went on, the Cook Report would again change the rating of the district from ‘leans Republican’ to ‘toss-up.’⁵⁰ Analyses of the race pointed to vastly different issue positions of the candidates and framed the race as one in which voters would have a clear choice between two opposing candidates.⁵¹ In that “candidates’ governing skills, character traits, and personal qualities may be relatively fixed,”⁵² Buttice and Stone (2012) suggest that the only thing candidates have control over in their campaigns is their

⁴⁷ <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/a-new-gop-congress-confronts-a-crushing-to-do-list-233058> (accessed 4/11/19)

⁴⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/02/house-republicans-unveil-tax-reform-plan.html> (accessed 4/11/19)

⁴⁹ <https://www.oregister.com/2017/05/08/healthcare-vote-increases-risk-for-o-c-gop-congress-members/> (accessed 4/11/19)

⁵⁰ <https://cookpolitical.com/analysis/house/house-overview/house-three-more-gop-seats-join-toss-column> (accessed 4/11/19)

⁵¹ <https://www.oregister.com/2018/10/24/no-middle-ground-orange-county-house-candidates-pitch-two-different-american-visions-in-bellwether-race/> (accessed 4/13/19)

⁵² Buttice, M., & Stone, W. (2012). Candidates Matter: Policy and Quality Differences in Congressional Elections. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(3): 882.

issue positioning. The extent to which voters reference those issue differences in their vote is highly dependent upon how well voters recognize the candidates and their issue differences. Referencing Lipinski, et. al.'s (2005) findings with respect to the importance of knowledge among ambivalent partisans or independent voters, campaign intensity was found to significantly increase voters' knowledge.

IV. The Influence of a Quality Challenger in CA-45

Lipinski, et. al (2005) found that intense House campaigns can affect voters' decision making process with respect to voting in Congressional elections. "Most scholars have argued that an important criterion of an intense race is that campaign spending be competitive: the typical measure of competitiveness is that the incumbent candidate should not spend more than twice the amount of the challenger."⁵³ Quality challengers to House incumbents have variously been defined as challengers with experience and funding,⁵⁴ or those who can mount a credible campaign, primarily because they have the resources to do so.⁵⁵ Experience and issue positions do matter for challengers, especially when the degree of ideological difference between candidates is large, as was the case in CA-45. Buttice and Stone (2012) suggest that incumbents having strong personal qualities are more likely to dissuade potential challengers from entering a race. This, of course, assumes that the incumbents are at least well known by their constituents. Given what we know about both the incumbency advantage and partisanship as a voting cue, one

⁵³ Lipinski, et. al (2005): 180.

⁵⁴ Jacobson, Gary C. 2009. *The Politics of Congressional Elections*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Longman

⁵⁵ Buttice, M., & Stone, W. (2012): 871.

might have expected that challengers to Representative Walters would not have been very credible in 2018, given the 2016 Congressional election when Democratic challenger Ron Varasteh spent \$42,761 compared to Mimi Walters' \$1,663,841.⁵⁶

It was clear that the Congressional campaign in 2018 would be different compared to 2016. Four Democrats and one Independent candidate qualified to be on the June 2018 primary ballot. By mid-April 2018 they had raised almost \$3.7 million dollars which reflected higher fundraising totals in this election across the entire County of Orange.⁵⁷ The eventual challenger to Representative Walters, Katie Porter, would go on to raise \$6,898,755 and spend \$6,815,008 compared to Mimi Walters' totals of \$4,901,654 and \$5,244,605⁵⁸ According to Lapinski et. al.'s (2005) criteria for a competitive race (margin of victory was less than 20 points and no candidate spent double that of the opponent), the Congressional race in CA-45 was very competitive race. Ominously, Duquette, et. al. (2013) found that "a high level of spending by a U.S. House incumbent can often be a sign of political weakness, not strength."⁵⁹ More specifically, "when each candidate spends \$2 million attempting to secure a given U.S. House seat, the incumbent's vote share falls to about 53 percentage points, reflecting a relatively competitive race."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Source: opensecrets.org (<https://www.opensecrets.org/races/summary?cycle=2016&id=CA45&spec=N>, Accessed 4/13/19)

⁵⁷ <https://www.ocregister.com/2018/04/17/congressional-candidates-have-raised-29m-in-o-c-races-already-doubling-entire-2016-election-total/> (accessed 4/13/19).

⁵⁸ Source: opensecrets.org (<https://www.opensecrets.org/races/summary?cycle=2018&id=CA45>, accessed 4/13/19).

⁵⁹ Duquette, et. al., (2013): 168-169.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*: 169.

National attention⁶¹ no doubt raised the profile of the race in CA-45, and the level of interest in it in the district. According to a survey⁶² conducted by the University of California at Berkeley’s Institute for Governmental Studies (IGS) September 16-23, 2018, 93 percent of likely voters in the district demonstrated a ‘high’ interest in the Congressional race, and 73 percent indicated that the November 2018 Midterm election was ‘more important’ to them than previous elections. The IGS poll found more than half of likely voters considered candidates’ views on healthcare (69%), immigration (66%), taxes (60%), the economy (64%), environmental policies (54%), and gun laws (62%) to be among the most important issues when considering their support for a candidate. When asked how favorable their opinion was of Mimi Walters, 45 percent indicated a favorable opinion and 50 percent indicated an unfavorable opinion of the incumbent Representative. Towards the end of the 2018 election campaign then, Representative Walters’ favorability was lower than what could be expected from an incumbent, and on the issue which the largest percentage of likely voters considered most important (healthcare), her legislative record was at odds with the district.

V. Conclusions

The race in CA-45 was named a bellwether race for the 2018 Midterm elections because the district was an exemplar of the suburban, college educated vote which may have previously voted Republican, but might become more amenable to the Democratic Party in the age of

⁶¹ See <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/which-u-s-house-race-is-the-best-2018-bellwether/> (accessed 4/3/18)

⁶² See: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0wv831zd> (accessed 4/13/19)

Donald Trump. The district supported Hillary Clinton in 2016, though it re-elected its incumbent representative, Republican Mimi Walters, at the same time. For this 'purple' district which contained a significant percentage of Non-Party Preference (NPP) voters, the race would reflect the importance of issues, and issue representation, over partisanship.

The registration trend in the district had been steadily against the Republican Party from the time of the first election in the newly drawn district in 2012. From that election until the 2018 election, the percentage of registered Republicans decreased by over 6 percent. Democratic Party registration increased by over 2 percentage points during this time period, but the largest registration gains were in the category of NPP voters. Younger voters, and those voters who are naturalized citizens, are significantly more likely to register as NPP. Had these trends been recognized by the incumbent or her campaign, modification of her issue positions, or at least a more visible presence in the district, would have been a reasonable adjustment in what was no longer a Republican majority district. Walters did not do either; her support in favor of the Republican tax plan and the attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA) would be against what a majority of her constituents preferred. Her absence from the district perhaps decreased name recognition, or even her level of approval from constituents. With the entry of high quality challengers who could counter her issue positions and spend the money to make issue contrasts apparent it seemed reasonable to reclassify the district as 'toss-up; as the Cook Report eventually did. Katie Porter, the Democratic winner of the November 2018 election, won the seat 52.1% to 47.9%, and spent over \$1.5 million more than Walters did to do so.

Although CA-45 is now represented by Democrat Katie Porter, it remains a very ‘purple’ district. Voter registration trends continue to reflect a district comprised of three distinct partisan groups: registered Republicans, registered Democrats and Non-Party Preference voters. The higher levels of education and income of constituents in the district suggest a constituency which may be more interested in politics, and more aware of the actions and positions of their elected representative. This may be why Porter has already held three town halls in the district. The district will once again be the focus of attention in 2020 as the National Republican Congressional Committee has named the district a targeted district.⁶³ In joining the Congressional Progressive Caucus, and maintaining a progressive stance on political issues, Porter may be vulnerable to Republican categorizations as being ‘too left’ for the district.⁶⁴ Provided that Porter learns the lessons of her predecessor Mimi Walters, and increases her name recognition along with strong campaign fundraising, her issue positions may be more acceptable to the district given that voters feel she is more connected to the district than her predecessor.

⁶³ <https://www.rollcall.com/news/campaigns/nrcc-to-target-55-house-democrats-in-2020> (accessed 4/13/19)

⁶⁴ <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-orange-county-freshmen-first-year-congress-20190319-story.html> (accessed 4/13/19)

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