# Republican Candidates' Positions on Donald Trump in the 2016 Congressional Elections: Strategies and Consequences

HUCHEN LIU and GARY C. JACOBSON

*Donald Trump's nomination posed a challenge for Republican congressional candidates running on the ticket with him in 2016. The nominee's intense base of support within the party combined with his unprecedented unpopularity more broadly required these candidates to think strategically about supporting or opposing him. This article examines how they responded to that challenge, what explains their different responses, and what electoral consequences ensued from their choices. The data show that candidates' positions on Trump primarily reflected the partisanship of their districts and secondarily their gender and incumbency status. Their strategic choices had little general impact in an election almost completely dominated by partisanship, but in at least a few instances refusal to support Trump may have been necessary for the Republican incumbent to win reelection.*

Keywords: 2016 election, Congress, candidate strategies, Trump

Donald Trump's nomination gave Republican congressional candidates plenty to worry about. It split their party both before and after the convention. It placed at the top of their ticket the most unpopular major-party candidate on record, one who was especially unpopular among women, young people, and racial minorities. The Trump campaign was thin on the ground and on the airwaves. Trump lost the presidential debates (Jacobson 2017a). The *Access Hollywood* video of him boasting of sexual assaults on women, exposed on October 6 and followed by multiple accusations of sexual harassment from victims (Blau 2016),[1] revealed a vulgar misogynist. In short, any endorsement of Trump, let alone a close association with him, appeared to carry serious electoral risks. On the other hand, deserting him was also risky. If Trump appalled Republican leaders and conservative intellectuals, he enjoyed widespread support among ordinary Republicans as well as some conservative talk radio and Fox News personalities eager to join a right-wing populist crusade. He found backers in all of the party's ideological factions, but with support concentrated among less-educated, blue-collar Republicans, especially

**Huchen Liu** is a Ph.D. candidate in political science at the University of California, San Diego. He is conducting dissertation research on revolving-door lobbying in the American national government. **Gary C. Jacobson** is a Distinguished Professor of Political Science, Emeritus, at the University of California, San Diego. He specializes in the study of U.S. elections, parties, interest groups, public opinion, and Congress.

1. Trump denied all of these accusations.



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men, resentful of their eroding economic prospects and declining cultural centrality (Jacobson 2017a). Republican candidates ignored the anger and energy of Trump's supporters at their peril; rejection of Trump could look like a rejection of a large and riled-up segment of their own base.

Although we now know that Trump's candidacy harmed very few Republican candidates and probably helped more of them than it harmed (Jacobson 2017b), this outcome, like Trump's victory, was not widely anticipated. Trump's candidacy thus posed a genuine strategic challenge to Republican candidates. This article examines how they responded to that challenge; what explains their different responses; and what, if any, electoral consequences ensued from their choices. The first section reviews the contours of public opinion that gave Republicans every reason to worry about sharing the ballot with Trump. It also suggests why these worries turned out to be unfounded. The second section analyzes how Republican candidates positioned themselves regarding Trump. The third section examines the consequences of those choices, considering whether they had any effect at all in an election where partisanship was so overwhelmingly dominant.

## The Danger Posed by Trump

Establishment Republicans opposed Trump's nomination for multiple reasons. They pointed variously to his character—citing his narcissism, mendacity, vulgarity, misogyny, ignorance, demagogy, racism, and instability—and to his unorthodox positions on the economy (opposition to free trade and entitlement reform), foreign policy (questioning traditional alliances, praising Vladimir Putin), and his dubious devotion to social conservatism (Jacobson 2016). Their critiques could be scathing. For example, columnist Peter Wehner, who had served in the Reagan and both Bush administrations, offered this appraisal at the beginning of the election year in January: "Mr. Trump's virulent combination of ignorance, emotional instability, demagogy, solipsism and vindictiveness would do more than result in a failed presidency; it could very well lead to a national catastrophe. The prospect of Donald Trump as commander in chief should send a chill down the spine of every American" (Wehner 2016). No fewer than 22 movement conservative luminaries, including Glenn Beck, L. Brent Bozell III, Mona Charen, Erick Erikson, William Kristol, Yuval Levin, Edwin Meese III, John Podhoretz, and Thomas Sowell contributed to a *National Review* symposium denouncing Trump's candidacy (*National Review Online* 2016). Every living former Republican presidential candidate—both Bushes, Bob Dole, John McCain, and most vocally Mitt Romney—opposed him as well.

Aside from their concern for the fate of the nation under a Trump presidency, Republican leaders and pundits worried that Trump's nomination would inflict serious long-run and short-term damage on their party. For the long run, they feared it would alienate growing portions of the electorate, particularly minorities and younger voters. For the short term, they feared Trump's candidacy would wreak disaster on the rest of the Republican ticket and cost them control of Congress (Bernstein 2015; Kamisar 2015; Cornwell 2016; Gerson 2016). It is easy to understand why. All of Trump's presumed

defects as a candidate were on recurrent display during the primary and general election campaigns: his remarkable ignorance of basic institutional features of the political system and the fundamentals of U.S. foreign and domestic policy, with no evident inclination to learn any more about them (Miller 2015); his indifference to truth that gave fact checkers a field day (*Washington Post* 2016); and his checkered business career, replete with questionable dealings, bankruptcies stiffing stockholders and suppliers, a phony university, and a charitable foundation that dispensed other people's money (Buettner and Bagli 2016; Fahrenthold 2016).[2]

This record was not lost on the electorate, which gave Trump the lowest favorability ratings of any candidate on record. He began his pursuit of the presidency in negative territory on the favorability question (percent favorable minus percent unfavorable) and remained there in every one of the more than 300 polls taken during the election year.[3] Trump's opponent, Hillary Clinton, also received net negative favorability ratings, but they were consistently better than Trump's, and she remained ahead of him on this score throughout the campaign (Liu and Jacobson 2017).

Voters expressed negative opinions of Trump on a variety of other dimensions as well. According to averages from surveys taken after Labor Day (Figure 1), more than 60% of prospective voters said that he was unqualified, unprepared, and temperamentally unsuited to the presidency. Majorities also considered him racist, untrustworthy, crazy, dangerous, and disrespectful of women; nearly half said he was corrupt. Negative opinions of Clinton were much less prevalent on most of these characteristics (corruption and dishonesty are the exceptions). As the surveys repeated these questions over the months following the conventions, partisan differences grew appreciably, but the overall aggregate responses changed little. On a more positive note, majorities also consistently agreed that Trump was smart, tough, successful, and a hard worker.[4] Survey data also depicted Trump as a likely loser. He trailed Clinton consistently in the horse-race polls for 18 months in a pattern that paralleled their net favorability trends (Liu and Jacobson 2017).

Figures 2 and 3 offer a detailed look at the (smoothed) trends in public reactions to Trump and Clinton during the final five months of the campaign, highlighting key campaign events.[5] Twice during this period Trump's net favorability dropped noticeably, to Clinton's net advantage. The first time was after the conventions. Party divisions were on full display at both conventions, but they were more glaring on the Republican side. Many senior Republican leaders, including former presidents and presidential candidates,

2. Trump University settled a fraud lawsuit for $25 million after the election.

3. The data are from 320 ABC News/*Washington Post*, Ap-Gfk, Bloomberg, CBS News/*New York Times*, CNN, Democracy Corps, Fox News, Franklin Pierce, Gallup, IBD/TIPP, Ipsos, Marist-McClatchy, Morning Consult, NBC Survey Monkey, Public Policy Polling, Public Policy Research Institute, Quinnipiac, Suffolk/*USA Today*, and YouGov/*Economist* polls reported at .huffingtonpost.com/pollster and pollingreport.com.

4. The data in Figure 1 are from surveys by *The Economist*/YouGov, ABC News/*Washington Post*, CBS News/*New York Times*, Bloomberg, CNN, Fox News, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, NBC News/Survey Monkey, Quinnipiac, Monmouth, George Washington-Battleground, Public Religion Research Institute, Pew, Franklin Pierce, and Fairleigh Dickenson polls reported at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/pollster/, http://www.pollingreport.com/, and the sponsors' websites during the campaign. The format for most of these questions was "Would you use the words below to describe Donald Trump [Hillary Clinton]?"

5. For the sources of the data in Figures 2 and 3, see footnote 3.

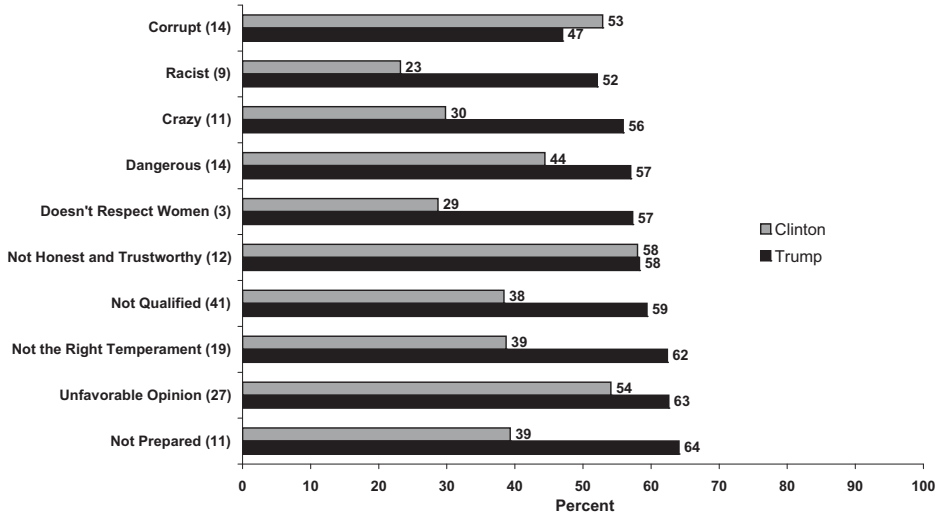


**FIGURE 1.** Assessments of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.

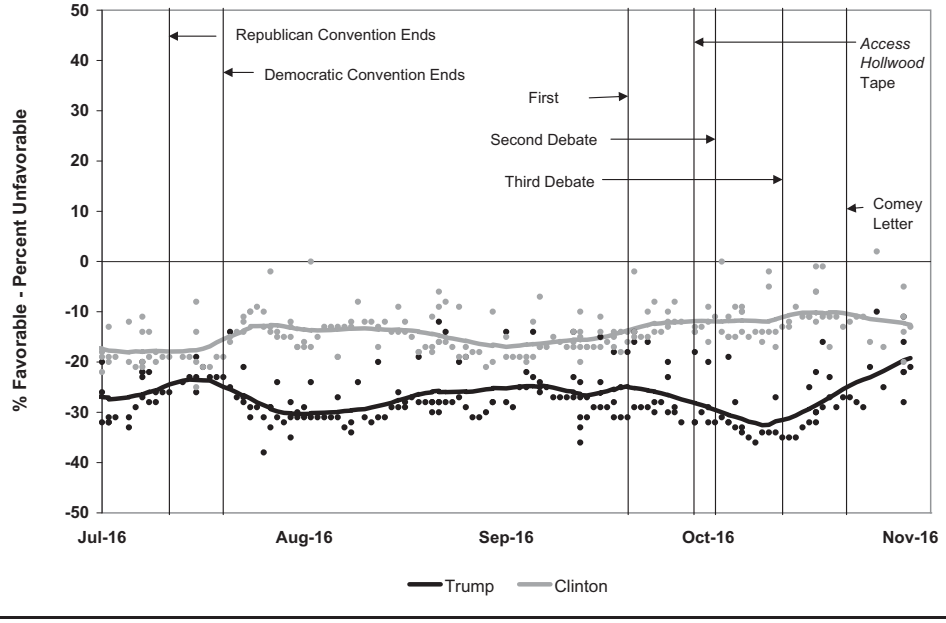


**FIGURE 2.** Net favorability of Clinton and Trump, July–November 2016.

senators, and governors—traditionally prominent convention participants—elected to stay away from Cleveland. Some delegates not reconciled to Trump's nomination sought unsuccessfully to pass a resolution freeing delegates to vote for any candidate. Ted Cruz, given the prime-time speaking spot customarily granted the second-place candidate in

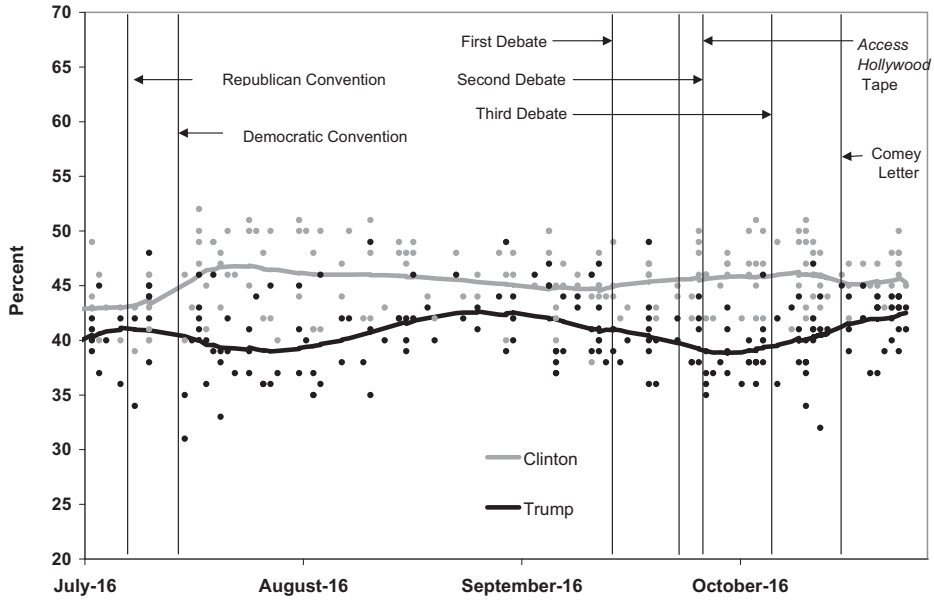


**FIGURE 3. Clinton–Trump matchup, June–November 2016.**

return for endorsing the winner, pointedly declined to endorse Trump, telling Republicans instead to "vote their conscience." Trump had a very small convention bounce; Clinton's, despite considerable anger from Bernie Sanders supporters over leaked e-mails revealing the Democratic National Committee's bias against their candidate, was noticeably larger.

The second notable slide in Trump's standing occurred during the debate season, which was by consensus dominated by Clinton[6] and included the surfacing of the *Access Hollywood* video just before the second debate. These were moments when Republican candidates faced their toughest decisions about how closely, if at all, to stick with Trump. Both times, however, Trump's public support rebounded and, with the apparent help of Federal Bureau of Investigation Director James Comey's letter to Congress on October 28 that put Clinton's e-mails under the spotlight once again, Trump finished the campaign on what was for him a high point.

What kept Trump's candidacy afloat and eventually delivered his Electoral College if not popular vote victory was his success in rallying ordinary Republicans to his side. He was able to do so largely because, whatever doubts they had about Trump, they thought Hillary Clinton was worse (Jacobson 2017a). Opinions of both candidates grew increasingly polarized along party lines over the course of the campaign (Figures 4 and 5). Trump's net favorability among Republican identifiers rose over the last few months of the campaign, while their views of Clinton grew increasingly negative.[7] During the final

6. See the surveys covering all three debates at http://www.pollingreport.com/wh16.htm (accessed December 12, 2016).

7. Opinions of Trump among independents also improved, while Clinton's got worse.

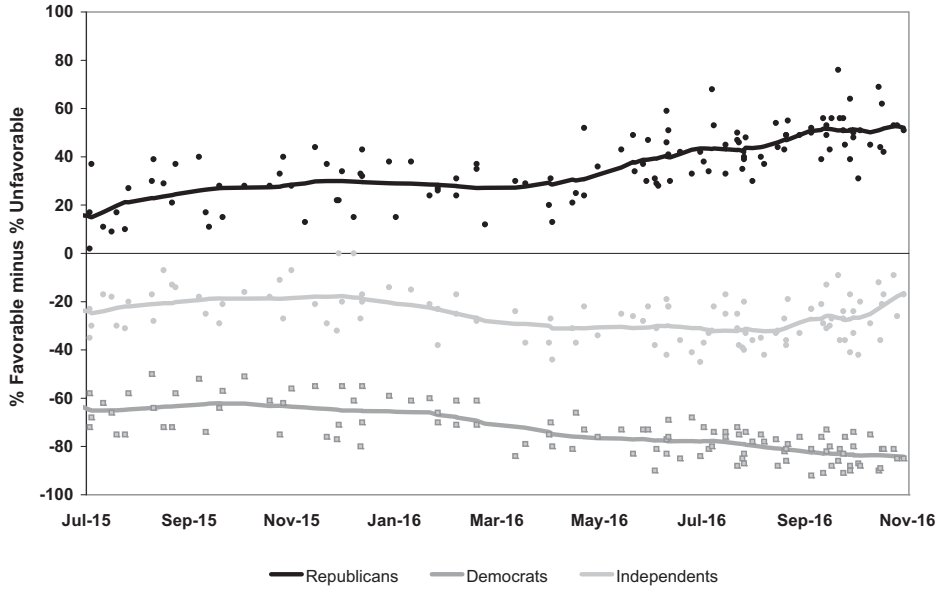


**FIGURE 4. Trump's net favorability by party.**

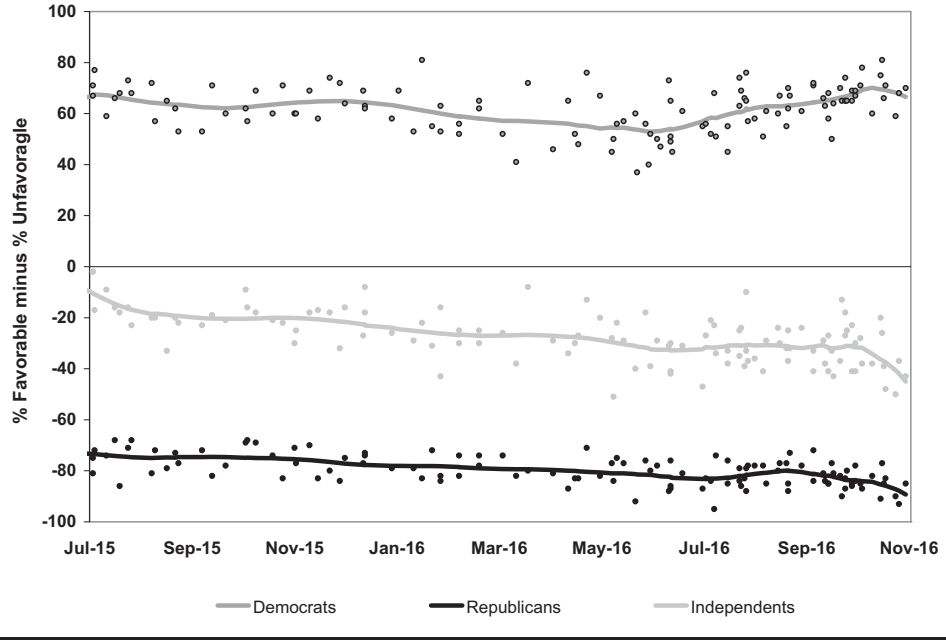


**FIGURE 5. Clinton's net favorability, by party.**

month of the campaign, not only did an average of 91% of partisans typically express unfavorable opinions of the other party's candidate, but for both candidates about 80% chose the "very unfavorable" option (Jacobson 2017a). When it came to evaluating the

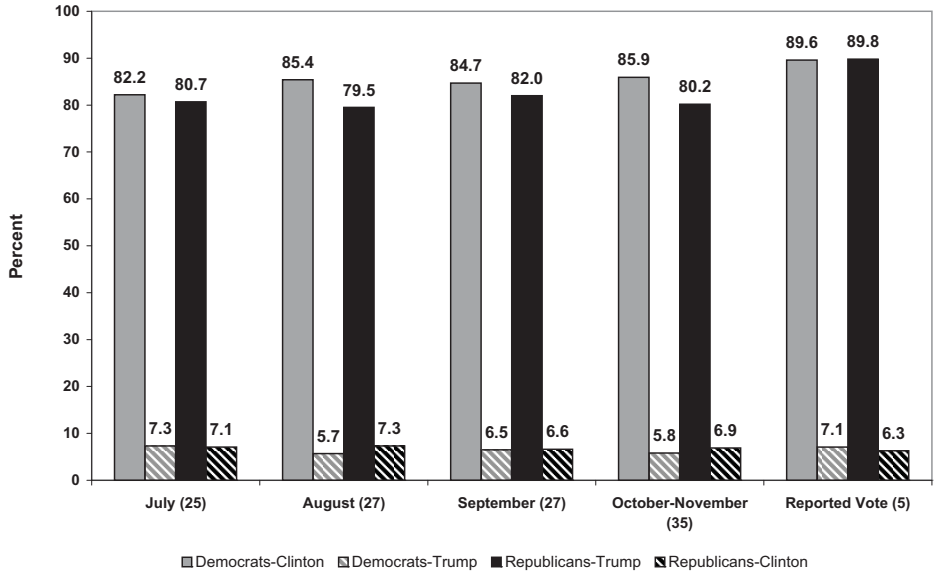


**FIGURE 6. Partisan voting intentions (monthly averages).**

candidates, divisions within the parties were overshadowed by much greater divisions between them; no matter what they thought of Trump, for the vast majority of Republicans, Clinton was not an acceptable alternative. In this they echoed columnist Peter Wehner, quoted at the beginning of this article, who, despite his excoriation of Trump, said he could never vote for Clinton.

Figure 6 illustrates both a primary source of Republican fears from the Trump candidacy and why they proved unfounded. Throughout the entire campaign season, Democrats were readier to vote for Clinton than Republicans were for Trump. But also notice that Republican voters, although more hesitant to support their candidate, were not planning to defect to Clinton in significant numbers. When it came to voting, most of these hesitant Republicans opted for Trump, who ran an average of 9.6 percentage points higher among his own partisans in the postelection surveys than he had in the month before the election; Clinton, by comparison, ran only 3.7 points higher among her partisans in postelection surveys. These results are consistent with analyses indicating that late-deciding voters broke disproportionately for Trump, especially in the swing states (Blake 2016b).

Trump also won a large majority of voters who had equally positive or negative opinions of both candidates. According to the exit poll, voters who thought one candidate was qualified or had the right temperament for the presidency and the other did not voted overwhelmingly (90% or more) for the favored candidate. But those who thought both (5 to 6%) or neither (14%) had either of these characteristics went strongly for Trump, with margins ranging from 69–15 to 77–12 across the four possible subgroups. When the candidates were seen as equally good or bad, the desire for change prevailed and most voters broke for Trump. The election confirmed that the negative assessments of Trump

summarized in Figure 2 were not necessarily deal breakers; among Trump's supporters in these surveys, 15% had considered him a racist, 13% said he was crazy, and only 81% deemed him qualified, yet they had planned to vote for him anyway.

What had appeared to be a real threat to Republican control of the Senate and perhaps even the House vanished in the face of Trump's victory and very high levels of party loyalty and straight ticket voting in the electorate (Jacobson 2017b). Defending 24 of the 34 Senate seats in play in 2016, including seven in states won by Obama in 2012, Republicans lost only two. And defending their largest House contingent since the 1920s, Republicans lost only a net six seats. These were not results that seemed likely earlier in the election year, however, and Republican candidates had to brace themselves for the possibility that Trump would lose badly. How did they attempt to do so? And did their strategic decisions affect the results, enabling them to avoid damage from the Trump candidacy where it was likely to pose difficulties? In the next section, we examine how and why Republican candidates adopted various strategies for handling the gaudy presence of Trump at the top of their ticket.

## On the Ticket with Trump

Republican candidates faced a variety of options in relating to the Trump candidacy and diverse local conditions that might guide their choice among them, conditions that varied over time with campaign events, notably the *Access Hollywood* tape. The options included direct endorsement of Trump (with varying levels of enthusiasm); supporting the "Republican ticket" without explicit mention of Trump; remaining silent and, when asked, refusing to say how they would vote; or publicly refusing to support or vote for Trump. The option of supporting and voting for Clinton existed in theory, but not a single Republican congressional candidate selected it (Blake 2016a).

The choice among options depended on both the personal characteristics of the Republican candidate and the political environment in which they found themselves. The obvious strategic choice for Republicans running in solidly Republican states or districts was straightforward: support Trump. He was the party's nominee, he was not Hillary Clinton, and potential losses among disaffected voters who rejected Trump were most unlikely to be large enough to elect a Democrat. Such Republicans might, however, share the critique of Trump's character and positions freely expressed by Republicans not on any ballot and wish to dissociate themselves from someone they thought was not an authentic Republican and who was likely to lose, anyway. Extremely tepid endorsement or even silence was unlikely to damage their electoral prospects or tarnish their Republican credentials. Endorsing Clinton, on the other hand, would be a flagrant expression of party disloyalty that would guarantee future primary challenges and so was out of the question.

Republicans in states or districts where the competitive balance was sufficiently even to leave them vulnerable had a tougher choice. Too close an association with Trump could cost them support from swing voters, especially women, minorities, and the highly educated, while refusal to support him could anger their core Republican base, especially

its fired-up white, blue-collar, male component. Waffling was a good strategic bet: criticizing Trump for his more outré statements and behavior toward women but nonetheless supporting him as the Republican nominee (perhaps treating him as He Who Must Not Be Named). An alternative was to keep mum at least until it was too late for the choice to become a campaign issue. Especially after the *Access Hollywood* tape, declining to endorse or vote for Trump without supporting Clinton was also an option.

Republican candidates running in states and districts where Democrats held a clear edge faced different problems. Support for Trump at any level of enthusiasm would probably guarantee defeat, but backing Clinton was unlikely to help much either. Ignoring the national race entirely was probably the best strategy, but one not easy to execute if the media or the opposing candidate demanded a public stand; refusal to commit could also turn voters off. The alternative was not to be strategic at all: Republicans with no hope of winning were free to back Trump to the hilt without considering the electoral consequences (assuming they actually preferred and agreed with him); candidates wildly out of step with their constituencies are not uncommon where nominations go begging and only ideological zealots apply, and some eager Trump acolytes did mount futile challenges to impregnable Democrats. Thus a curvilinear relationship between local partisanship and degree of support for Trump is conceivable: higher support in lopsidedly partisan states and districts and lower support in competitive constituencies.

## Senate Candidates' Strategic Choices

Prior to the October 6 surfacing of the *Access Hollywood* videotape of Trump bragging about his sleazy sexual exploits, 27 of the 33 Republican Senate candidates had expressed some level of support for Trump, albeit with widely varied enthusiasm and with many expressing reservations about his rhetoric, behavior, and qualifications. Of the remaining candidates, three had already said they would not support him and three had refused to say. The three early nonsupporters were Mark Kirk (IL), Mike Lee (UT), and Chris Vance (WA); Kirk and Vance were running in deep blue states, but Lee opposed Trump, not popular among Utah Republicans,[8] on grounds of both character and policy. The three playing it coy were Scott Milne (VT); Pat Toomey (PA), who declined to say how he would vote until Election Day, when he reported a vote for Trump; and Mark Callahan (OR), who refused to commit until the end but said afterward that he had voted for Trump. Callahan and Milne were hopeless challengers in solidly Democratic states; Toomey was an incumbent in a very competitive race.

After the *Access Hollywood* video hit the news, virtually all Republican Senate candidates condemned Trump's behavior, and many of them wavered or fell silent for a few days. However, only eight withdrew their endorsements. The common theme of those

8. Trump won only 46% of the vote in Utah, 23 points below the average for the previous four elections; independent conservative Evan McMullen won 22%, so close to one third of the regular Utah Republican voters evidently deserted Trump.

**TABLE 1**
**State Competitiveness and Support for Trump Before and After October 6**

| | Before October 6 | | Immediately After | | Final Position | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *N* | *Percent* | *N* | *Percent* | *N* | *Percent* |
| Republican states | | | | | | |
| Supported | 13 | 92.9 | 10 | 71.4 | 12 | 85.7 |
| Did not support | 1 | 7.1 | 4 | 28.6 | 2 | 14.3 |
| Declined to say | | | | | | |
| Competitive States | | | | | | |
| Supported | 9 | 81.8 | 5 | 45.5 | 5 | 45.5 |
| Did not support | 1 | 9.1 | 5 | 45.5 | 5 | 45.5 |
| Declined to say | 1 | 9.1 | 1 | 9.1 | 1 | 9.1 |
| Democratic States | | | | | | |
| Supported | 5 | 62.5 | 4 | 50.0 | 5 | 62.5 |
| Did not support | 1 | 12.5 | 3 | 37.5 | 2 | 25.0 |
| Declined to say | 2 | 25.0 | 1 | 12.5 | 1 | 12.5 |

*Note*: Republican states are those designated by the Cook Political Report as safe Republican or Republican favored; Democratic states are those where the Democrat was safe or favored; states listed as tossup or only leaning to a party are classified as competitive.

who, however gingerly, eventually reconfirmed their support for Trump, was unalloyed partisanship: he was the Republican nominee and the alternative, Clinton, would deliver an unthinkable third Obama term. Florida senator Marco Rubio put it this way: "I ran against Donald Trump. And while I respect that voters chose him as the GOP nominee, I have never hesitated to oppose his policies I disagree with. And I have consistently rejected his offensive rhetoric and behavior. I disagree with him on many things, but I disagree with his opponent on virtually everything. I wish we had better choices for President. But I do not want Hillary Clinton to be our next President. And therefore my position has not changed" (King 2016). An alternative was to say Trump's apology was sufficient: North Carolina senator Richard Burr stated, "I think what he said is indefensible, and I'm not going to try to defend him. But as a son of a Presbyterian minister, my dad always taught me that when people ask for forgiveness, you should give it to them. He did that, and I've certainly forgiven him" (Campbell 2016). Wavering candidates were encouraged by his improved performance in the second debate and no signs of collapsing support among ordinary Republicans. It was also rather late to choose a replacement.

Of the eight Republican Senate candidates who did withdraw their endorsements, three reverted to backing Trump when the blowback from Trump supporters protesting their apostasy (protests encouraged by Trump campaign) become too intense to resist, eloquent testimony to the cross-pressures Trump's candidacy had put them under (Phillips 2016).[9] The pattern of responses clearly reflected strategic considerations (Table 1).

9. The five who withdrew their support permanently were Lisa Murkowski (AK), John McCain (AZ), Joe Heck (NV), Kelly Ayotte (NH), and Rob Portman (OH). The vacillators were Darryl Glenn (CO), Mike Crapo (ID), and John Thune (SD).

Before the video emerged, Republican candidates in competitive states were a bit less likely than those in safe Republican states to support Trump, but the difference was not significant ($\chi^2 = .71$, $p = .40$). Desertions after the video's release were most common in competitive states, and none of these deserters returned to Trump, whereas two in Republican-leaning states and one in a Democratic-leaning state did change their mind once again. In the end, the 40-point difference in levels of support for Trump between candidates in safe Republican and competitive states reached statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 4.59$, $p = .032$). In safely Democratic states, where strategic behavior was unlikely to make any difference, Trump support returned to its pre-video level (Colorado challenger Darryl Glenn returned to the fold, although former fence sitter Milne decided against Trump).

The two incumbent Republican women senators, Kelly Ayotte (NH) and Lisa Murkowski (AK), were among the permanent defectors, but the two women challengers, who had little prospect of winning anyway, Kathy Szeliga (MD) and Wendy Long (NY), stuck with Trump. Women who had formerly supported Trump were more likely to defect (2 of 4, 50%) than men (3 of 23, 15%); the difference is marginally significant ($\chi^2 = 3.08$, $p = .08$). But this difference only emerged among incumbents, and overall defection rates did not differ significantly by sex.

In the end, every Republican incumbent who supported Trump won, while the two who did not lost. One of them, Kirk, was in serious electoral trouble and would have lost with or without Trump. However, the other, Ayotte, was certainly hurt by his candidacy. Already facing a stiff challenge in a state leaning blue, she deserted Trump (whom she had earlier called a "role model") after the *Access Hollywood* video surfaced, saying she would write in Republican vice presidential nominee Mike Pence. More important than her vacillation or apostasy, however, was the fact that Clinton won the state. In fact, for the first time in history, every Senate contest was won by the party that won the state's electoral votes. Thus support or nonsupport of Trump made no difference; more specifically, deserting Trump did not save candidates in states that went to Clinton or hurt candidates in states that went to Trump. Total partisan consistency swamped everything else (Jacobson 2017b).

## House Candidate Strategies

House candidates faced the same strategic options regarding Trump as Senate candidates, although a much smaller proportion ran in the competitive constituencies where their choice might actually matter (according to the Cook classifications, 9%, compared with 33% of Senate candidates). The positions on Trump taken by nonincumbent House candidates were sometimes difficult to ascertain—particularly for Republicans running invisible campaigns in overwhelmingly Democratic districts. This was not a problem with incumbents, however. The website FiveThirtyEight.com classified all Republican incumbents according to their positions regarding Trump on July 20, just after he was formally nominated at the convention (King and Arank 2016), and subsequent lists of

**TABLE 2**
**Republican House Incumbents' July 20 and Ultimate Positions on Donald Trump**

| | | Ultimate Position_ | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Support | | Oppose | | Refused to Say | |
| *538 Rating* | July 20 *N* | *N* | *Percent* | *N* | *Percent* | *N* | *Percent* |
| True believer | 9 | 9 | 100.0 | | | | |
| Eager unifier | 64 | 63 | 98.4 | 1 | 1.6 | | |
| Reluctant endorser | 56 | 54 | 96.4 | 2 | 3.6 | | |
| Non-namer | 44 | 38 | 86.4 | 6 | 13.6 | | |
| Quiet observer | 18 | 15 | 83.3 | 2 | 11.1 | 1 | 5.6 |
| Hesitant holdout | 19 | 4 | 21.0 | 14 | 73.7 | 1 | 5.3 |
| Trump snubber | 9 | | | 9 | 100.0 | | |
| Total | 219 | 183 | 83.6 | 34 | 15.5 | 2 | 0.9 |

*Note*: "True believers" supported Trump before he had nailed down the nomination; "eager unifiers" endorsed him after his nomination; "reluctant endorsers" did so with expressed reservations; "non-namers" said they would vote for the Republican nominee without mentioning his name; "quiet observers" kept mum about it; "hesitant holdouts" were publicly undecided; "Trump snubbers" said they would not vote for Trump.

supporters and defectors appeared regularly, particularly after the *Access Hollywood* video became public.[10]

The first column in Table 2 shows the distribution of incumbents' positions as of the Republican convention. About 80% supported their nominee, although with levels of enthusiasm ranging from strong and early support to "voting the Republican ticket" without naming the candidate (the first four categories). The rest either declined to say or did not endorse Trump. The ultimate position toward Trump, shown in the remaining columns, strongly reflected the member's initial position. None of the "true believers" or "Trump snubbers" changed positions. All but nine of the other 163 initial supporters stuck with him, although the "non-namers" were significantly less loyal ($\chi^2 = 7.61$, $p = .006$) as were, marginally, the "quiet observers" ($\chi^2 = 3.59$, $p = .058$). Most of the "hesitant holdouts" ultimately declined to support Trump, including all five women in this category. Of the 20 incumbent Republican women, 12 (60.0%) ultimately supported Trump, compared with 85.9% of the men ($\chi^2 = 9.87$, $p = .002$). But only one (Martha McSally, AZ 2) switched from support to nonsupport after the *Access Hollywood* video. The rest had never supported Trump, and the video may simply have killed any inclination or necessity to do so. As with Senators, some House Republicans, notably Jeff Fortenberry (NB 1) and Jason Chaffetz (UT 4), withdrew endorsements after the video but later said they would vote for him as the lesser of two evils.

As with Senate candidates, the final distribution of House candidates' positions on Trump strongly reflected the competitive status of the district (Table 3). A very large

10. We used lists of Trump supporters and deserters published at various points during the campaign (BBC News 2016; King and Arank 2016; Graham 2016). We also canvassed candidate websites, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, and news stories about them and their campaigns via Google. In some cases there was no information at all; in others, no mention of Trump could be found and it was unclear if this was part of a deliberate strategy to avoid the topic.

**TABLE 3**
**House District Competitiveness and Support for Donald Trump**

| | Republican | | Competitive | | Democratic | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| District Leaning | *N* | *Percent* | *N* | *Percent* | *N* | *Percent* |
| All Candidates | | | | | | |
| Supported | 190 | 88.0 | 19 | 51.3 | 85 | 57.8 |
| Did not support | 24 | 11.1 | 18 | 48.7 | 21 | 14.3 |
| Refused to Say | 2 | 0.9 | | | 15 | 10.2 |
| Unascertained | | | | | 26 | 17.7 |
| Incumbents | | | | | | |
| Support | 172 | 87.7 | 11 | 47.8 | | |
| Don't support | 22 | 11.3 | 12 | 52.2 | | |
| Refuse to Say | 2 | 0.9 | | | | |
| Unascertained | | | | | | |
| Nonincumbents | | | | | | |
| Support | 18 | 90.0 | 8 | 57.1 | 85 | 57.8 |
| Don't support | 2 | 9.5 | 6 | 42.9 | 21 | 14.3 |
| Refuse to Say | | | | | 15 | 10.2 |
| Unascertained | | | | | 26 | 17.7 |

*Note*: Republican districts are those designated by the Cook Political Report of October 5, 2016, as safe Republican or Republican favored; Democratic districts are those where the Democrat was safe or favored; districts listed as tossup or only leaning to a party are classified as competitive.

majority (88.0%) running in safe Republican districts backed Trump, while barely half in competitive districts did so ($\chi^2 = 32.38$, $p < .001$). Nonsupport was about nine percentage points higher among incumbents than among nonincumbents. Candidates in safe Democratic districts supported Trump at higher rates than in competitive districts (70% if the unascertained are dropped from the denominator) but at lower rates than in safe Republican districts. A notably larger proportion of these candidates tried to duck the question, a tempting choice where supporting Trump would doom a candidacy but renouncing him would offend the party base. Candidates in competitive districts, under much more scrutiny, did not have this luxury, for refusing to take a position could be portrayed by opponents as an act of cowardice that might offend voters on both sides of the Trump–Clinton contest.

Also, as with Senate candidates, the women were more likely to reject Trump, but again, the effect is confined to incumbents. Overall, 12 of 44 women candidates (27.3%) refused to support Trump, compared with 51 of 356 male candidates (14.3%), a significant difference ($\chi^2 = 4.95$, $p = .026$). Among incumbents, 8 of 20 women (40%) rejected Trump, compared with 26 of 199 men (13.1%), again a significant difference ($\chi^2 = 10.05$, $p = .002$). But among candidates for open seats or challengers to incumbent Democrats, male and female candidates deserted Trump at nearly identical rates.

Multivariate analyses incorporating a variety of controls confirm that Republican congressional candidates adopted positions on Trump that primarily reflected the partisanship of their constituents and, secondarily, the candidate's gender and incumbency

**TABLE 4**
**House Republican Candidates' Positions on Trump**

| | All Republicans | | Incumbents | | Nonincumbents | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *N* | *Percent* | *N* | *Percent* | *N* | *Percent* |
| Consistent supporters | 256 | 64.0 | 158 | 72.2 | 98 | 54.2 |
| Wavering or later supporters | 37 | 9.3 | 25 | 11.4 | 12 | 6.6 |
| Refused to say | 18 | 4.5 | 2 | 0.9 | 16 | 8.8 |
| Later nonsupporters | 24 | 6.0 | 10 | 4.6 | 14 | 7.7 |
| Consistent nonsupporters | 39 | 9.8 | 24 | 11.0 | 15 | 8.3 |
| Not ascertainable | 26 | 6.5 | | | 26 | 14.4 |

*Note*: See text for definitions of categories.

status. We estimated a series of ordered logit models that predict Republican candidates' positions on Trump as a function of their district's' demographic characteristics and their personal attributes, both for all of the candidates and for the subset of Republican incumbents running for reelection. We constructed two measures of the candidates' positions on Trump. The first is a 5-point scale in the order of decreasing support for Trump: 1 = the candidate consistently supported Trump from the time he obtained the Republican nomination or earlier, 2 = the candidate either supported Trump later in the campaign and closer to the general election or switched from not supporting him or from declining to say to supporting him at some point before the election, 3 = the candidate refused to state a position on Trump, 4 = the candidate switched from supporting to not supporting Trump at some point before the election, and 5 = the candidate had consistently refused to support Trump all along. The 26 candidates (all challengers) whose positions on Trump were unascertainable were excluded from the analyses. The distribution of Republican candidates' positions on this scale reveals that nearly three quarters ended up supporting Trump, with incumbents more supportive than other Republicans (Table 4).

This scale incorporates some of the observable variations in Trump support, but it is susceptible to errors arising from incomplete information about the nuances and timing of the public stances taken by the candidates as gleaned from their websites, Facebook and Twitter accounts, and news coverage available through Google searches. This was particularly a problem with challengers. Thus, for most of our ordered logit estimates (models 5a–5c in Table 5), we instead used a 3-point scale generated by collapsing the 5-point scale into three categories: supporting Trump, refusing to say, and not supporting Trump, reflecting the ultimate position each candidate took on Trump. We use the original 5-point scale as the dependent variable in one model (5d) as a robustness check.

The first equation in Table 5 (5a) is a stripped-down model that examines only district competitiveness, candidate gender (1 if female, 0 if male), and incumbency status (1 if incumbent, 0 if nonincumbent) as independent variables. As suggested by the results in Table 3, the relationship between district partisanship as measured by the Obama vote and support for Trump is nonlinear, with support decreasing as the district becomes more competitive, then increasing again as it becomes more safely Democratic. In these

**TABLE 5**
**District Demographics, Personal Attributes, and 2016 Republican House Candidates, Positions on Trump (Logit Estimates)**

| | All Republican Candidates | | Incumbents | All Republican Candidates | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *3-Point Scale* | | | *5-point Scale* | *Nonsupport* |
| *Dependent Variable: Position on Trump* | *5a* | *5b* | *5c* | *5d* | *5e* |
| Independent Variables: | | | | | |
| Obama Vote 2012 | -.298*** | -.285** | -.120** | -.148** | .414*** |
| | (.107) | (.083) | (.039) | (.056) | (.107) |
| Obama Vote 2012 Squared | .002** | .002** | | .001* | -.003** |
| | (.001) | (.001) | | (.000) | (.001) |
| Percent over 65 | | .010 | .052 | .047 | |
| | | (.032) | (.082) | (.043) | |
| Percent Unemployed | | -.043 | -.119 | .027 | |
| | | (.104) | (.170) | (.092) | |
| Median Household Income | | -.000 | -.000 | -.000 | |
| | | (.000) | (.000) | (.000) | |
| Percent White | | -.011 | .028 | -.008 | |
| | | (.012) | (.021) | (.011) | |
| Percent High School Graduates | | .084$^{\dagger}$ | -.080 | .076$^{\dagger}$ | |
| | | (.045) | (.089) | (.040) | |
| Percent College Graduates | | -.013 | .018 | -.018 | |
| | | (.025) | (.051) | (.022) | |
| Personal Attributes | | | | | |
| Female | -.580 | -.674$^{\dagger}$ | -1.628** | -.679* | .748$^{\dagger}$ |
| | (.370) | (.380) | (.592) | (.330) | (.395) |
| Incumbent | -.650 | -.690$^{\dagger}$ | | -.652$^{\dagger}$ | .992* |
| | (.406) | (.411) | | (.341) | (.445) |
| Member of Freedom Caucus | | | .395 | | |
| | | | (.827) | | |
| DW-NOMINATE | | | .966 | | |
| | | | (.689) | | |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | .074 | .088 | .204 | .046 | .096 |
| Number of Cases | 374 | 374 | 217 | 374 | 374 |

*Note*: Equations 5a, 5b, 5c, and 5d are ordered logit estimates; Equation 5e is a dichotomous logit estimate.
$^{\dagger}p < .10$; $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$.

bluer districts, Republican candidates, with slim chances of winning anyway, had little to lose by supporting Trump and most did so, presumably out of conviction. The sex and incumbency variables indicate that Republican women and incumbents were less likely to support Trump, although the coefficients fall below standard levels of statistical significance ($p = .12$ and $p = .11$, respectively). Model 5b contains a fuller set of district demographic characteristics as covariates, obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau (2017). In addition to district partisanship and the sex and incumbency variables, it includes the percentage of the district population aged 65 or older, the percentage of the unemployed, median household income, the percentage of whites among the population, and the

percentages of high school and college graduates. Coefficient estimates reiterate the finding that partisanship, gender, and incumbency (the latter two were marginally significant in this model) affected candidates' Trump positions. District demographics beyond partisanship had little discernable effect; only the percentage of high school graduates in the district was marginally significant, although with a very small substantive effect. None of these demographic variables mattered even when we leave district partisanship out of the equation (equation not shown).

Model 5c is restricted to the subset of the data consisting of all incumbent Republican House members running for reelection in 2016. We drop the quadratic term for the district vote for Obama in 2012 because there are no observations for incumbents over the range of the Obama vote where support for Trump would be expected to turn positive once more; for incumbents, the relationship between district (Democratic) partisanship and support for Trump is thus basically linear (and negative). The model indicates that, other things equal, incumbent Republican women were much less likely to support Trump. The equation also includes two measures of incumbent Republicans' ideological stance—whether they belonged in the House Freedom Caucus, a conservative faction of House Republicans associated with the Tea Party movement, and their DW-NOMINATE scores during the 113$^{th}$ Congress obtained from Poole and Rosenthal's website (Carroll et al. 2015). These variables are not significantly associated with the dependent variable, jointly or individually. Only when we exclude the 2012 Obama vote is DW-NOMINATE positively associated with the probability that Republican incumbents supported Trump; the more conservative the member, the more likely to support Trump (equation not shown); otherwise, the effect of district partisanship fully absorbs that of incumbent ideology. In Equation 5d we use the 5-point scale as the dependent variable as a robustness check. It contains the same covariates as Equation 5b and replicates the findings regarding the effects of the Obama vote, candidate gender, and incumbency status and the general irrelevance of other district demographics.

The final equation in Table 5, 5e, estimates a new dependent variable, a simple dichotomy indicating refusal to support Trump (scored as 1) rather than supporting him or refusing to say (scored as 0). As expected, the signs on the coefficients now reverse, and again district partisanship (nonlinearly), candidate gender, and incumbency are significant predictors of opposition to Trump. Figure 7 displays the estimated effects of these variables on the probability of not supporting Trump. The probabilities are shown for the actual range of district partisanship (the Obama vote percentage) for Republican candidates in each of the four categories generated by the combination of gender and incumbency. The estimated probability of not supporting Trump increases for incumbents as the district becomes more Democratic, with the effect greater for women than for men if they are incumbents but the opposite if they are not. These estimates reiterate the simple relationships revealed in cross tabulations: Among incumbents in districts where Obama won at least 45% of the vote in 2012, 4 of 5 women (80%) did not support Trump, compared with 19 of 61 men (31%). Among nonincumbents in districts where Obama received less than 60%, only 1 of 9 women deserted Trump (11%), compared with 14 of 68 men (21%).

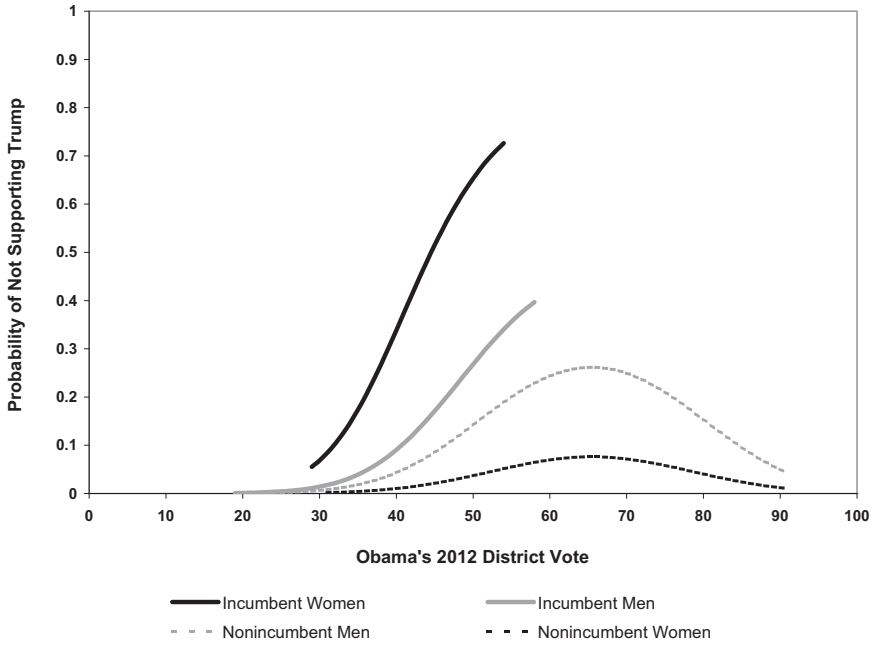


**FIGURE 7. The probatility of not supporting Trump, by district partisanship, gender, and incumbency status.**

## Electoral Effects

Did strategic adaptation to the district (not supporting Trump in marginal and Democratic-leaning districts, supporting him in decisively Republican districts) help? What, if any, effect did Republican candidates' position on Trump have on their electoral fates? In terms of vote shares generally, position on Trump has no detectable effect once district partisanship is controlled for (using either the 2012 or the 2016 district-level Republican presidential vote) or with additional controls for district characteristics related to the peculiarities of the Trump campaign, namely racial composition and education level. The regression estimates are in Table 6. In no equation does support or nonsupport of Trump have anything close to a significant effect on the vote either way. District partisanship dominates, with incumbency status and district demographics having some additional influence on the vote. Note that the coefficients on these latter variables change signs when the 2016 presidential vote replaces the 2012 vote; the demographic effects are fully incorporated by the Trump vote.[11] Note also the very modest value of incumbency compared to the decades between mid-1960s through the early years of this century, when it had averaged about 8 percentage points (Jacobson 2015). According to the adjusted $R^2$s, the equations actually fit the data better without than with the Trump support variable (equation not shown).

11. For more details, see Jacobson (2017b).

**TABLE 6**
**Effects of Trump Support on the Republican House Vote**

| | 6a | 6b | 6c | 6d |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Trump Support | -.11 | .24 | .06 | -.19 |
| | (.42) | (.33) | (.28) | (.30) |
| Romney Vote, 2012 | 1.14*** | .78*** | .69*** | |
| | (.02) | (.03) | (.03) | |
| Incumbency Status | | 1.76* | 2.80*** | 2.54*** |
| | | (.84) | (.74) | (.78) |
| Party holding seat | | 9.34*** | 6.83*** | 7.75*** |
| | | (1.75) | (1.54) | (1.62) |
| Percent White | | | .10*** | -.02 |
| | | | (.01) | (.02) |
| Percent College Grad. | | | -.16*** | .10*** |
| | | | (.02) | (.03) |
| Trump Vote, 2016 | | | | .75*** |
| | | | | (.03) |
| Constant | -4.16*** | 7.23*** | 11.28*** | 7.37*** |
| | (1.24) | (1.38) | (1.48) | (1.69) |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | .882 | .931 | .948 | .942 |
| Number of Cases | 299 | 299 | 299 | 299 |

*Note*: The dependent variable is the Republican's share of the major party vote in the district; the independent variables are the Republican candidate's position on Trump (1 if supported, −1 if not supported, 0 if not revealed); Romney's district share of the major-party vote in 2012, incumbency status (1 if Republican, −1 if Democrat, 0 if the seat is open), party holding seat (1 if Republican, 0 if Democrat) the percentage of whites and college graduates in the district, and Trump's share of the major-party vote in 2016. The data include only districts not redrawn between 2014 and 2016, with information on the Trump support variable, and with major party competition.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Victories rather than votes are what ultimately matter, however. Did Republican candidates' positions on Trump affect their probability of winning even if the overall effect on vote shares was undetectable? In the vast majority of cases, it did not, because again local partisanship swamped everything else. Every one of the 398 districts classified by Cook as safe for or favoring a party was won by that party, regardless of the Republican candidate's position on Trump. In the 37 competitive seats, the nonsupporters were a bit more likely to win (13 of 18, 72.2%) than supporters (12 of 19, 63.2%), but the difference falls far short of significance ($\chi^2 = .34, p = .556$). Still, it is possible to detect a glimmer of a relationship by adopting a somewhat different perspective. Thirty-five of the 435 districts delivered split verdicts in 2016—different parties winning pluralities in the presidential and House elections (Table 7).[12] In districts won by Trump, supporters and nonsupporters won at similar, very high rates. In districts won by Clinton, however, nonsupporters were significantly more likely to win, 33.3% compared with 11.7% for supporters ($\chi^2 = 12.28$, $p = .002$; the "unascertained" category was excluded from this

12. Thirty-five is a very low number, second lowest after 2012 (26 split outcomes) in modern history; the one district (WI 3) Trump won but where the incumbent Democrat (Ron Kind) ran unopposed is not included in Table 7.

**TABLE 7**
**Support for Trump and Electoral Fates of Republican House Candidates**

| | Districts Won by Trump | | | Districts Won by Clinton | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Won | Lost | Win % | Won | Lost | Win % |
| Trump Position | | | | | | |
| Supporter | 191 | 9 | 95.5 | 11 | 83 | 11.7 |
| Refused to say | 2 | | 100.0 | | 15 | 0.0 |
| Nonsupporter | 25 | 2 | 92.6 | 12 | 24 | 33.3 |
| Unascertained | | | | | 26 | 0.0 |

**TABLE 8**
**Effects of Trump Support on the House Election Outcomes (Logit Estimates)**

| | 8a | 8b | 8c | 8d | 8e | 8f |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Trump Support | | -.82* | -.78$^{\dagger}$ | | -.69* | -.61 |
| | | (.33) | (.44) | | (.28) | (.42) |
| Romney Vote, 2012 | .53*** | .58*** | .52*** | | | |
| | (.07) | (.08) | (.12) | | | |
| Trump Vote, 2016 | | | | .33*** | .36*** | .34*** |
| | | | | (.04) | (.04) | (.04) |
| Incumbency Status | | | 2.68*** | | | 3.64*** |
| | | | (.58) | | | (.68) |
| Constant | -26.06*** | -27.37*** | -25.29*** | -15.59*** | -16.62*** | -17.20*** |
| | (3.45) | (3.98) | (5.87) | (1.88) | (2.08) | (3.89) |
| Number of Cases | 374 | 374 | 374 | 374 | 374 | 374 |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | .801 | .816 | .898 | .714 | .727 | .892 |
| Percent Correctly Predicted | 94.1 | 94.4 | 97.6 | 92.0 | 93.3 | 97.9 |

*Note*: The dependent variable is 1 if the Republican won, 0 if the Democrat won; the independent variables are the Republican candidate's position on Trump (1 if supported, −1 if not supported, 0 if not revealed); Romney's district share of the major-party vote in 2012, incumbency status (1 if Republican, −1 if Democrat, 0 if the seat is open), and Trump's share of the major-party vote in 2016. The data exclude districts without information on the Trump support variable.
$^{\dagger}p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

analysis). All 15 candidates who refused to disclose their choice in these districts lost; hiding clearly did not help.

To examine the effect of the Republicans' position on Trump in greater detail, we estimated a series of logit models and again found evidence that there was some electoral advantage in declining to support Trump in the more closely balanced districts (Table 8). The equations indicate that support for Trump was negatively related to the probability of a Republican victory; that is, supporters were less likely to win than nonsupporters.[13] The estimated coefficient is a bit smaller and becomes less precise when incumbency status is taken into account and when district partisanship is measured by Trump's vote in

13. For these equations, we include uncontested and redrawn districts; the substantive results do not change if we exclude them as in Table 6.

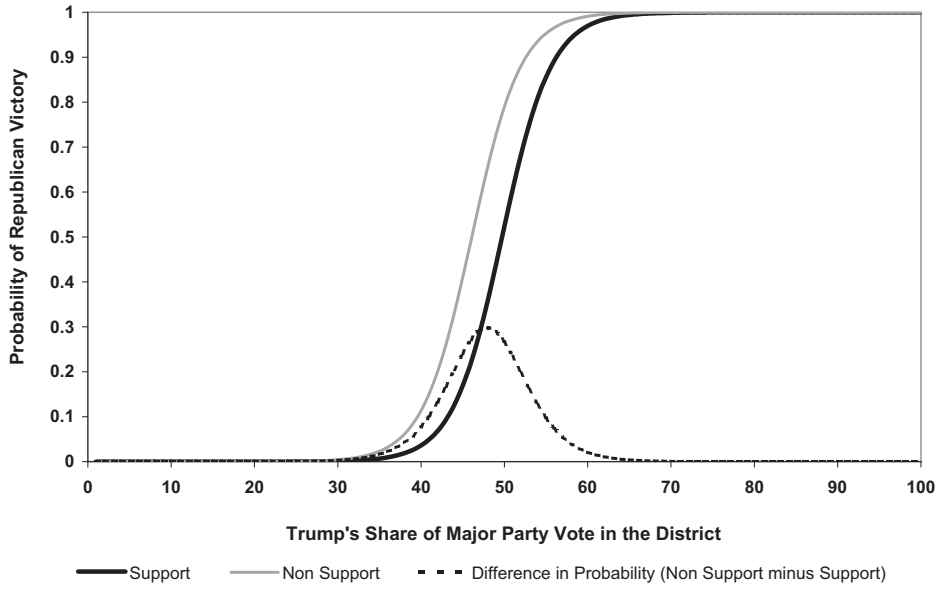


**FIGURE 8. Trump support and probability of a Republican victory in House races.**

2016 rather than Romney's vote in 2012. To view the size of the effect, we used the parameters from Equation 8f to estimate the probability of a Democrat winning across a range of presidential outcomes depending on whether the Republican supported or declined to support Trump, with incumbency status set at its mean value. The results are shown in Figure 8. Republicans had a higher estimated probability of winning if they did not support Trump in those districts where the presidential contest was relatively close, with the difference peaking at about .30 in districts won where Trump won 48%, right at his district-level average (48.4%).

The finding that not supporting Trump was an advantage in competitive districts prompted another look at the effect of positions on Trump on the Republican's vote share in these districts. We replicated equation 6d (estimating the effect on the Republican vote of supporting or not supporting Trump, controlling for incumbency, district demographics, and the 2016 presidential vote) but confined the analysis to the 55 districts in which the presidential vote was within +/- 5 points of Trump's national major party vote share. The result was a coefficient on Trump support of −1.57 (standard error = .58), which was significant at $p < .01$. Thus not supporting rather than supporting Trump was worth about three additional percentage points to Republicans in these districts. On the whole, then, the evidence indicates that a strategy of declining to support Trump in districts with more evenly balanced presidential competition was the better option, although it was hardly decisive. Sixteen Republicans were in this category—12 of them incumbents—and 12 of them won, including 11 of the incumbents. But it should be noted that only two of the winners would have lost if three points were shaved off their vote percentage. Thus strategic behavior did not have a major effect on the distribution of

House seats after the election, but at least a few House Republicans may have saved their seats by publicly declining to support the head of their ticket.

## Conclusion

Donald Trump's extraordinarily high negatives, reinforced at times during the general election campaign, posed a potential threat to the Republican Senate and House candidates on the ticket with him. How they dealt with that threat reflected strategic adaptation to state and district conditions: Candidates in competitive districts were significantly more likely to decline to support him, while candidates with securely Republican or hopelessly Democratic constituencies were more likely, however reluctantly in some cases, to support him. Incumbents were more strategic in this regard than nonincumbents, and incumbent Republican women had the highest propensity to desert Trump, especially in competitive districts. Two nonexclusive explanations come to mind. First, as women, they were genuinely disgusted by his manifest misogyny, understandably taking it more personally than men. But also, as women and for the same reason, they were more likely to be forgiven by Trump's Republican voters for declining to support him, for even many of Trump's fans found the video disturbing.[14] Thus a woman's risk of losing a portion of Trump's constituency by refusing to back him was arguably smaller than a man's.

Ultimately, though, how Republican candidates dealt with Trump had almost no detectable effect on most of their electoral fortunes, if only because partisanship dominated voting up and down the ticket. Despite some real reservations, Republican voters stuck with Trump in overwhelming numbers and likewise with their party's House and Senate candidates (Jacobson 2017b). With no revolt against Trump by ordinary Republicans, how Republican candidates managed their association with him turned out not to matter in a large majority of states and districts. However, in House districts where Republican incumbents could not rely on local partisan majorities to elect them—specifically those won by Hillary Clinton—deserting Trump may have added to their vote totals and thus victory prospects. Because a candidate's position on Trump was endogenous, we make no claim that endorsing Trump would have been harmless to Republicans in such districts. In particular, Republican incumbents representing constituencies with very large Latino populations—for example, those won by David Valadao (CA 21), Carlos Curbelo (FL 26), Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (FL 27), and Will Hurd (TX 23)—would almost certainly have damaged their prospects had they publicly backed Trump. Still, 11 of 12 incumbent Republicans in districts won by Clinton who did support Trump were successful, compared with 12 of 15 incumbents who did not support him. The number of districts where the candidate's position on Trump mattered is thus probably very small. It will be interesting to see how these and other congressional Republicans manage their continuing public relationship with Trump, who through at least the first months of his

14. About one-third of respondents to the October 15–18 YouGov survey who were planning to vote for Trump said they were bothered by the video.

administration has remained as unpopular, divisive, and erratic a president as he was a candidate, during the 115th Congress and later in their 2018 campaigns.

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