

**A PRODUCT OF THE ENVIRONMENT: ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRAINT,
CANDIDATE BEHAVIOR AND THE SPEED OF DEMOCRACY**

A Dissertation

by

JAMES BOYCE COTTRILL

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2004

Major Subject: Political Science

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ABSTRACT

A Product of the Environment: Environmental Constraint,
Candidate Behavior and the Speed of Democracy. (December 2004)

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Elections are the engine that drives democracy. The central question of this dissertation relates to the speed of that engine: How long does it take for elections to reflect changing preferences in the electorate? The findings presented in this dissertation suggest that electoral change is the result of a gradual process of natural selection in which the political environment, rather than district service activity, is the key variable. Comparing elections data across different types of district environment, I find evidence that the environment affects levels of competition and electoral outcomes. Utilizing an event history statistical model to examine various risk factors for electoral defeat, I find that the political environment of the district is the most important factor influencing the risk of defeat even when controlling for district service behaviors. Over time, the district environment operates as a self-correcting mechanism, purging political misfits and replacing them with representatives who better reflect the ideology of the district. Electoral change typically results more from evolution than revolution – it may not occur quickly, and it may not occur in every district, but it does occur when and where it is needed.

For my wife, Emily.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Elections are the engine that drives democracy, and competition is the fuel. Elections provide the mechanism by which public preferences and choices are translated into governmental action. Competition provides the choices that fuel the electoral engine. Where competition is weak, or nonexistent, the engine stalls and the link between the electorate and the government becomes weakened. In this chapter I discuss the importance of electoral competition for American democracy and discuss some of the problems, controversies and suggested remedies associated with electoral competition in the United States.

Electoral Competition and Democracy

The importance of free and competitive elections to American democracy is something that few citizens would question. Despite a widespread lack of interest in and knowledge about politics, most Americans have been socialized to view competitive elections as a normative good that is one of the defining characteristics of our system of government. American public policy, both foreign and domestic, has generally reinforced this view of competitive elections. In the foreign policy arena, economic and

This dissertation follows the style and format of the *American Journal of Political Science*.

military sanctions against communist, fascist, and authoritarian regimes reflect an American belief that competitive, democratic elections are an inherent right that all people of the world should be entitled to. On the domestic front, campaign finance reforms and the debate over term limits demonstrate a desire to promote greater competitiveness in our electoral system.

Political science scholarship has also assumed that competition is a normative good. The extensive literature addressing the “vanishing marginals” or “incumbency advantage” (*e.g.*, Ansolabehere, Brady, and Fiorina 1992, Cover 1977, Fiorina 1977, Jacobson 1987, Krasno 1994, Mayhew 1974b) implicitly suggests that a healthy level of electoral competition is necessary in order to have good representation. Fiorina (1977) explicitly notes the role that competition plays in ensuring the accountability of public officials. According to Fiorina, the only way to guarantee that changes in the public’s policy preferences are reflected in the legislature is through electoral turnover. The assumption here is that the legislature should be responsive to the “popular will” and electoral competition is a necessary mechanism for this responsiveness.

Voter participation is another cornerstone of American elections that is typically viewed as a normative good in our society. Expansion of the franchise has been an important recurring theme in American history, underscoring the importance of citizen participation in the electoral process. Even in the postreform Congress the goal of increasing citizen participation has been forcefully articulated, as evidenced by the so-called “Motor Voter” law that streamlined the voter registration process in an attempt to remove perceived impediments to citizen participation.

One of the principal ironies of American democracy, however, is that despite our professed desire for competitive elections and for high levels of citizen participation, elections are not all that competitive and voter turnout is remarkably low.

The lack of competition in American elections is particularly ironic. For much of this century, while we engaged our military forces throughout the world in the fight against communism, our nation effectively had a single party system of its own in the southern states. Until the late eighties and early nineties, it was common for incumbent Democrats in the American south to face no opposition whatsoever. And even in other districts, where the incumbent did face a challenger, Mayhew (1974b) observed that only in a very few of these races was the incumbent in any real electoral danger. Mayhew's observation that marginal districts were "vanishing" fueled an explosion of scholarship examining the causes and implications of the "incumbency advantage," which I will discuss in greater detail in the chapters that follow.

Low voter turnout in the United States is also quite ironic when one considers that as the nation extended the voting franchise to more and more people, fewer and fewer of them have felt inclined to exercise that right. Interestingly enough, the dual ironies of low competitiveness and low participation may be related to one another. When competition is low, voters may feel disinclined to participate in the election, and vice versa. In an editorial by *New Republic* editor Peter Beinart (2002), the author asserts "the 2002 election clearly shows that competitive races bring more people to the polls" (6). Beinart observes that in Minnesota and South Dakota, where races were quite competitive, voter turnout averaged 61%, as compared to a national figure of 39%. The

proposed relationship between competition and participation may be linked to individual voter feelings of political efficacy (following Pateman 1970); in close races, voters may feel that their vote actually matters.

Another negative side effect of declining competition may be, at least in part, the increasing public mistrust of and antipathy for Congress documented in the work of such scholars as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) and Glen Parker (1996). Hibbing and Theiss-Morse found that citizens believe Congress is out of touch with ordinary people, in part because they don't believe their vote makes a difference; lack of competition inspires a belief that electoral outcomes are predetermined and challengers will never win. Parker suggests that Congress as an institution is in decline because quality challengers do not want to run for an institution that is regarded so poorly and is populated by "rent seekers" who care more about individual gains than the "intrinsic returns" of good public policy. According to Parker's theory, declining competition creates a sort of feedback loop of institutional deterioration whereby Congress becomes less and less attractive to quality challengers, elections become less and less competitive, and Congress as an institution becomes less effective.

Thus, electoral competition is important for democracy not only because it provides voters with alternatives from which they can choose, but also because it may stimulate participation in the political process. It is easy to understand why scholars and other interested observers of the political system are concerned about the decline of electoral competition over the last half century. The perception of uncompetitive

elections has become so widespread, in fact, that the problem has entered the realm of public discourse and has invited a number of suggested reforms for our electoral system.

Three Publicly Debated Tracks of Electoral Reform

Proponents of electoral reform believe that competitive elections are an essential, if not defining, characteristic of American democracy, and they fear that “the epidemic of noncompetitive elections [is] a plague that alienates many Americans from their government” (Beinart 2002, 6). There are, of course, some implicit assumptions in the arguments of those who contend that elections are uncompetitive. For example, to claim that congressional elections are uncompetitive assumes that challengers are losing because they face insurmountable odds in getting their message across to voters, rather than voters simply preferring the incumbent’s message to that of the challenger. Those who subscribe to this point of view seem to regard high reelection rates with the same disdain that district attorneys have for the recidivism rate of criminals.

Suggested reforms take these assumptions one step further; not only do reformers assume that elections are uncompetitive, but they also make assumptions about the root causes of the lack of competition. Beinart (2002) summarizes what he perceives to be the three most frequently suggested reforms for our electoral system: *Districting Reform*, *Campaign Finance Reform*, and *Term Limits*. Each of these potential reforms is intended to level the playing field for challengers and stimulate greater electoral competition. Each has a particular logic to support it, and each has its share of practical problems

undermining its effectiveness. It is worth examining each of these suggested reforms briefly to provide a sense of how the problem of electoral competition is framed in the court of public opinion. The assumptions that underlie these reforms suggest several interesting normative and empirical questions that I will address in the study that follows.

Districting Reform

Districting reform is suggested by Beinart as one way to increase competition in congressional elections. The principle behind this reform measure is that gerrymandering has reduced the number of competitive seats to almost none, so reformers should advocate measures to reduce the ability of the parties to influence the outcome of future elections through the manipulation of the redistricting process. Beinart (2002, 6) notes that Iowa's relatively non-partisan redistricting process resulted in "reasonably close" elections in four out of five districts. While Fiorina (1977) was dismissive of this explanation for the incumbency advantage in his "Tale of Two Districts" case study, a reexamination of the districting explanation may be worthwhile because it emphasizes the importance of the political environment on competition. Since a primary theme of my study is to establish the importance of environmental factors on competition, redistricting is an issue I will revisit in more detail in the coming chapters.

Campaign Finance Reform

Campaign finance reform has been a politically hot topic in contemporary political discourse, culminating in the recent McCain-Feingold reforms which attempt to close many of the loopholes that existed in previous reform efforts. Campaign finance

reform efforts such as McCain-Feingold hope to increase electoral competition by closing the gap between incumbent spending and challenger spending. If incumbents are limited in their ability to raise funds, then challengers have an opportunity to compete on a more even financial keel and perhaps defeat more incumbents. Campaign finance reform, then, is motivated by a belief that the problem of uncompetitive elections is rooted in behavioral, rather than environmental, causes. Reform efforts implicitly suggest that higher levels of incumbent spending are the principal source of the incumbency advantage and they betray an underlying belief that if spending were equal, challengers would have a fighting chance.

Term Limits

Term limits are another suggested reform that has enjoyed recent popularity, although the topic has seemed to fade somewhat in the last couple of years. Term limits stimulate competition by forcing electoral turnover through structural means, setting an arbitrary limit to the number of terms a legislator may serve. Proponents note that in states that impose term limits on their governors, competition is much greater than it is in House and Senate races (Beinart 2002, 6). Implicit in the term limit argument is the belief that either voters are too ignorant to “vote the bums out,” or incumbents are simply too skillful at campaigning to be defeated. Term limits, then, are a behavioral remedy that seeks to restrict incumbents from running again after they serve a specified number of terms. Term limits also impose restrictions on voters by not allowing them to reelect their representative after his or her term is up. To borrow once again from the criminal justice analogy, proponents of term limits seek to combat “congressional

recidivism” with a form of “mandatory sentencing guidelines” established by term limits.

While each of these suggested reforms has its merits, there are many problems with each of them. The most fundamental problem with any reform of the electoral system is whether or not the underlying assumptions about the problem are true. First, we must agree that there is an “incumbency advantage” that works against challengers making it difficult for them to mount successful campaigns. Then, we must identify the roots of this advantage, whether behavioral or environmental, in order to develop reforms that will meaningfully address the problem. Happily, these questions lend themselves to empirical enquiry and have been the subject of a great deal of scholarly research over the last thirty years.

The Scholarly Debate Over Competition: Are Elections Really Uncompetitive?

In this discussion I critique the rather pessimistic scholarly view of the state of electoral competition that has prevailed over the last thirty years, characterized by David Mayhew’s (1974b) studies of the “vanishing marginals.”¹ Two main criticisms emerge from this discussion, one empirical in nature and the other theoretical. First, the empirical evidence for the vanishing marginals is mixed, with several scholars finding little support for the argument (*e.g.*, Collie 1981, Gross and Garand 1984, Jacobson

¹ Typically, a marginal district is defined as one in which the victorious candidate wins with 50 to 55 percent of the vote. In such districts, the narrow margin of victory is thought to make the member more sensitive to constituent interests, since a strong challenge or a shift in the national partisan tides could spell defeat in the next election. In this sense, marginal districts are thought to be indicative of competitive elections and a sign of healthy democracy.

1987). Second, building on some of the aforementioned empirical results I will question the validity of using margins of victory as an indicator of competition. While the question of electoral competition is central to my dissertation, I will argue that competition is not tantamount to marginality.

In his articulation of the vanishing marginals argument, Mayhew (1974b) noted that since the 1950s the number of marginal districts has declined dramatically. Not surprisingly, electoral defeats declined during the same period. The strength of the so-called “incumbency effect” has led many scholars to question how competitive congressional districts can be if the incumbent wins an overwhelming percentage of the time (*e.g.*, Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987, Cover 1977, Fiorina 1974, 1989, Jacobson and Kernell 1983). Advantages such as the franking privilege, casework opportunities, distributive policies, and even simple name recognition have been offered as explanations for the electoral security of most incumbents. The further decline of the marginals in the seventies has been explained by some as the result of increased staff levels (Fiorina 1977), increased opportunities (due to the decentralization of committee structure) for members to “claim credit” (Mayhew 1974a), and a rise in “candidate centered” political campaigns (Wattenberg 1991). Whatever the reasons for the vanishing marginals, the literature has associated it with a decline in electoral competition characterized as the “incumbency effect.”

Some scholars, however, have turned a critical eye to the concept of marginality over the last twenty years (Bauer and Hibbing 1989, Collie 1981, Gross and Garand 1984, Jacobson 1987). Collie (1981) found no evidence of an increased incumbency

effect for the period 1952-76, and found that the general increase in electoral margins has not led to a decrease in electoral turnover. Building on Collie's findings, Gross and Garand (1984) find that "the post-1965 increase in electoral safety is a winners', and not and incumbency, advantage." Winners in open-seat contests were found to enjoy electoral margins as large as incumbents, casting doubt on the traditional conception of the "incumbency advantage."

Jacobson (1987) goes even further, declaring that "the marginals never vanished" in the first place. Citing the "heterogeneity of interelection vote swings," Jacobson finds that "incumbents are no safer now than they were in the 1950s; the marginals – properly defined – have not diminished, let alone vanished; the swing ratio has fallen little, if at all; and so competition for House seats held by incumbents has not, in fact, declined" (128). Bauer and Hibbing (1989) criticize Jacobson's findings as time-bound, arguing that Jacobson's key finding of "an increase in the tendency of big winners in House races to lose two years later" does not hold when the data is updated to include the 1980s (269). Bauer and Hibbing agree with Jacobson, however, that "the vote swing across districts has become more heterogeneous since the 1960s" (270). Taken as a whole, these studies present some interesting challenges to the prevailing explanations of the vanishing marginals, and suggest that a serious effort to refine our thinking about electoral competition might be a fruitful endeavor.

Thus, while much of the literature has focused on the vanishing marginals as indicative of declining competition, I believe that this approach may not be the best way to assess competition. In the preceding discussion I have tried to stimulate interest in the

questions to follow in the coming chapters: Is the “victim” really dead, merely endangered, or alive and well? Have the ways in which we approach the study of electoral competition (*i.e.*, the vanishing marginals) led us to unduly pessimistic appraisals of the state of competition? Is member behavior more influential than the political environment of the district in determining the level of electoral competition? And most importantly: How quickly does the electoral mechanism need to respond to public preferences for democracy to be considered responsive? These important questions will be addressed in the chapters that follow.

Plan of the Dissertation

In Chapter II, I examine in detail the key variables influencing electoral competition and critique past approaches to the study of electoral competition. While much has been made of measurement problems in the study of congressional elections, I believe that there have also been important theoretical and design problems in previous research. Specifically, I argue for the need to examine electoral competition as a *process* occurring over many elections, rather than as a static phenomenon.

Chapter III outlines my theory of environmental constraint. I explain why I believe environmental factors are more important to electoral outcomes than behavioral factors and provide some qualitative evidence for this belief. In particular, I will discuss the Texas redistricting of 2003 as a “real world” example of the seriousness with which politicians take the political environment. I will also discuss the non-partisan redistricting approach used in Iowa as evidence of how a technocratic approach to the

district environment may enhance competition, especially when compared with states having highly politicized redistricting processes.

In Chapter IV, I begin my empirical investigation of the effects of the political environment on competition. Using a measure of district partisanship oriented to the incumbent's party, I create three categories of district environment ranging from "Hostile" to "Friendly" and look for differences in the values of variables identified in Chapter II as being important for electoral competition across categories of district. In order to get a rough idea of the effects of district environment over time, I also examine the change in the values of three key variables over the course of three reelection bids for each category of district environment. The goal of Chapter IV is to provide some preliminary evidence for the importance of the district environment on electoral competition.

Chapter V provides a more rigorous examination of role of environmental factors on electoral outcomes, controlling for behavioral factors. Utilizing event history techniques, I assess the impact of several key variables on the risk of defeat in congressional elections. Controlling for behavioral factors, the model provides even stronger support for the primacy of environmental factors in determining electoral outcomes.

Chapter VI offers a concluding discussion in which the normative questions of Chapter I are revisited within the context of the dissertation findings. I will also discuss the implications of my findings for the existing literature and suggest avenues for future research.

CHAPTER II

DISSECTING ELECTORAL COMPETITION

Introduction

Like many important concepts essential to the study of democratic governments – such as liberty, justice, power – competition can be difficult to define and even more difficult to quantify. Previous scholarship has tended to regard competition as a function of incumbent safety or vulnerability. If the incumbent’s margin of victory in the last election was small, then he or she is thought to be vulnerable to defeat, and vice versa.

As noted in Chapter I, “marginality” is the concept most often used as a measure of, or surrogate for, competitiveness. The notion that an incumbent’s margin of victory might be an indicator of electoral safety or vulnerability has intuitive appeal and has enjoyed great popularity in the literature, especially since the 1970s. Small electoral margins of victory are regarded as a sign of vulnerability, and serve to attract serious, politically experienced challengers in the next race. Like sharks attracted to blood in the water, potential challengers are thought to be drawn to districts where incumbents have been elected by only the slimmest of margins.

If we are mainly interested in victory or defeat, however, it may be worth reconsidering the value of marginality as an indicator of vulnerability. In a winner-take-all electoral race, a challenger is not rewarded for “coming close” in an election (at least not substantively, and moral victories are beyond the scope of my argument). Losing by

one percentage point is still losing, and it is probably little consolation to the loser that observers will regard the winning incumbent as “vulnerable.” Fenno (1978, 14) suggests that margins of victory may be of limited interest to the winners as well, since most incumbents are usually fearful of electoral defeat regardless of how well they did in their last election.

Some scholars suggest that the heterogeneity of congressional candidates and districts makes it difficult to generalize about electoral safety or vulnerability. Fenno (1978, 36) concludes that “subjective assessments of electoral safety are more valid.” Collie (1981, 130) also believes that “the marginal/safe dichotomy may be somewhat artificially conceived,” in part because “there may be more dissimilarities among incumbents than similarities.” Collie’s study shows the severe limitations of the “marginality hypothesis.” If the “vanishing marginals” are really an indication of increasing electoral safety for incumbents then we should expect overall rates of turnover to be lower than ever, and we should find that even marginal incumbents increase their vote share and become safe. Collie finds that neither of these expectations is borne out by the data. But if marginality is not the best way to gauge vulnerability, what alternatives do we have?

The “Usual Suspects” of the Congressional Elections Literature

Rather than focusing exclusively on the size of the incumbent’s electoral margins, it is probably more useful to break down the individual components that are

associated with electoral success and look for weaknesses among these factors. If the incumbent seems to be vulnerable in one of these areas, then he or she is potentially vulnerable to defeat, regardless of previous victory margins.

Challenger Strength

Congressional elections scholars acknowledge the importance of challenger quality for competitive elections. According to Collie (1981) “the most powerful value of incumbency may be that of discouraging all opposition at the outset.” Fenno (1978), Mann and Wolfinger (1980), Gelman and King (1990), Cox and Katz (1996), Levitt and Wolfram (1997), and Jacobson and Kernell (1983) reinforce this theme, concluding that the primary source of the “incumbency advantage” is the ability of incumbents to discourage strong challengers from running in the first place.

But what constitutes a “strong” or “quality” challenge? Abramowitz (1991) and Levitt and Wolfram (1997) suggest that campaign money is key. Challengers generally lack the financial resources to mount a strong campaign, and thus incumbents are able to capitalize on greater name recognition and public trust to secure victory. Scott Thomas (1989) takes the argument a step further, suggesting that challengers need sufficient resource to purchase negative ads portraying the incumbent in a negative light. But since incumbents usually have greater resources and can successfully rebut these ads, challengers usually end up on the losing end of this battle.

Jacobson and Kernell (1983) contend that the previous political experience of the challenger is a key element of a strong challenger. Experienced challengers are better able to attract support in terms of both funding and votes, and they are better prepared to

mount a strategically sound campaign. Banks and Kiewiet (1989) demonstrate that incumbents often face weak challengers because inexperienced challengers are only seeking to gain experience for a run at a future open-seat race rather than seeking to win the current race.

Levitt and Wolfram (1997, 57) apparently reject the logic of running a losing race for the value of the experience, hypothesizing that some challengers may be reluctant to run against incumbents because the “stigma associated with losing has grown over time.” The authors offer no explanation or evidence for why they believe the stigma of losing has grown, but they believe that it may be a possible explanation for the scarcity of strong challengers. Parker (1996), however, believes a different type of stigma is responsible for the reluctance of challengers to run for Congress. Parker believes that the declining prestige of Congress itself makes potential candidates reluctant to run for office. Rather than fearing the stigma of losing, Parker seems to suggest that candidates might fear a “stigma of winning” simply by being associated with the lowest rated institution in our government (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1996).

Resources

Resources may be broken down into two general categories: money and ‘perks’ of office. Both types of resources are brought to bear by incumbents in their campaigns, and both are regarded as critical components for understanding electoral competition.

The role of campaign spending in congressional elections is viewed in the literature as important but difficult to untangle. Money is more important to challengers (Jacobson 2004), but incumbents must have sufficient money to answer the negative ads

of the incumbent (Thomas 1989). Determining the impact of spending on elections is difficult because the campaign spending of opposing candidates is strongly collinear; challenger spending affects incumbent spending and vice versa. Since Jacobson (2004) observes that incumbents who spend the most money are the most likely to lose, we might reasonably assume that districts that have the highest level of spending are probably the most competitive. Incumbents spend lavishly when it is necessary for survival.

But money is not the only resource that is available to incumbents. Perquisites of office may also be an important tool for re-election (Cover 1980, Cover 1985, Serra and Cover 1992). Fiorina (1977, 1989) suggests that the ability of incumbents to perform an ombudsmen role for constituents and use perquisites such as the frank and travel allowance has made incumbents safe from electoral defeat. Mayhew (1974a) has emphasized how advertising, credit claiming and position taking support the re-election efforts of incumbents. Several scholars have discounted the relationship between the “perks” of office and electoral success, however. Levitt and Wolfram (1997), for instance, find no evidence that the incumbency advantage is the result of “direct officeholder benefits.” One of the goals of the present study is to determine whether or not service to the district really can make an incumbent safe from defeat.

District Partisanship

Constituency partisanship is another important determinant of competition. Mann and Wolfinger (1980, 628) acknowledge the importance of the political environment, noting that “some districts have such a lopsided division of Republicans and Democrats

that members of the minority party have little chance of winning under any circumstances.” Similarly, Collie (1981, 130) concludes that her findings “fit most consistently in that body of research emphasizing the importance of district or contextual factors.”

The role of partisanship in the district environment will be a key building block of the argument I develop in the coming chapters. The context provided by the district environment constrains the ability of incumbents to control their own fate. The most successful incumbents are probably those who best understand the composition of their district, and are thus best able to match their ideology, personal qualities, and leadership style to the district. Fenno’s *Home Style* (1978) clearly shows the importance of knowing one’s district, and it is a lesson that the most successful incumbents probably learn before they run in the first place.

Ideology

Ideology is almost certainly an important factor in congressional elections, but probably only when there is a strong challenger who can exploit the incumbent’s record. Although voters may not be aware of their representative’s voting record in Congress, the possibility always exists that a future challenger will make a campaign issue of the incumbent’s voting record. Kingdon (1981) describes the need for incumbents to be able to explain their votes to constituents, and stresses the importance of a member’s voting history. An incumbent’s ideology, as reflected by their voting record in Congress, is probably not a major factor in most races but can become a severe liability when a strong challenger is able to find and exploit discrepancies in the incumbent’s voting

record. The difficulty in assessing the role of ideology in electoral competition is in measuring the distance between an incumbent and the voters in the district. I will discuss these difficulties in detail in chapters IV and V.

Personal Qualities

The personality, qualifications, and charisma of the candidate may influence the competitiveness of a race, but these qualities are difficult to quantify. According to Mann and Wolfinger (1980, 624) “voters appear to judge candidates, and incumbents in particular, on the basis of their perceived character, experience, and ties to the local community.” The authors go on to say that “the content of [voter] evaluations [of candidates] is both thin and highly personalized, with little apparent ideological or issue content” (631).

It should be clear that competition is more than merely an arbitrary level of vote percentage – it results from a variety of factors that make the outcome of an election more or less certain. Oddsmakers in Las Vegas would never rely solely on previous margins of victory to predict future winners in sports; instead, they factor in a variety of variables known to be related to victory (*e.g.*, injuries, weather, individual matchups, etc.). Similarly, political scientists should be hesitant to overemphasize marginality at the expense of other important variables.

Defining Competition: The Role of Uncertainty

In some sense, competition implies a level of uncertainty about the outcome of an election – the more competitive a race is, the harder it is to predict the outcome. It is this uncertainty that probably drives turnout in competitive elections; when the outcome of an election is uncertain, voters are more likely to feel that their participation matters. When the outcome of an election seems to be a foregone conclusion, voters are more likely to view participation as a waste of their time. The least competitive races of all are uncontested races, since the outcome of the election is never in doubt.

In contested races, however, competition is in the eye of the beholder. According to Fenno (1978, 14) “House members see uncertainty where outsiders would fail to unearth a single indicator of it.” Incumbents are likely to view any race as competitive, and they tend to run accordingly. News channels, on the other hand, tend to do the opposite: they exaggerate the level of certainty with their projections and lead voters to believe that the outcome is already known.

In today’s information age, in which the internet and cable news channels offer round-the-clock information and analysis of campaigns, uncertainty tends to be regarded as an unacceptable nuisance to be overcome as much as possible. Daily polls and projections seek to “inform” voters of the likely outcome of future elections, thus diminishing uncertainty (at least in the minds of voters) and influencing the perceived competitiveness of the races. In an electoral environment in which the media projects

winners before the elections have even concluded, it is no wonder that some voters seem to view elections as spectator sports rather than participatory events.

It is possible, however, that polls become self-fulfilling prophecies, guiding voter behavior more than predicting it. Goidel and Shields (1994) suggest that media attention to elections create a “bandwagon effect” that inflates the vote percentage of the winners. Candidates who are ahead in the polls are able to mobilize more of their supporters (who want to jump on the winning “bandwagon”), while candidates who are behind suffer because their supporters stay home (Americans hate losers). Gross and Garand (1984) find that “the post-1965 increase in electoral safety is a winners’, and not an incumbency, advantage.” The modern media coverage of elections has resulted in all winners, incumbent or open-seat, enjoying larger margins of victory.

Thus, the alleged decline of competition may be partly an artifact of media effects on margins of victory. The increasing perception of certainty has affected the size of victory margins. The true level of competition may be much closer than we think. In order to truly get a handle on competition we need to examine patterns of electoral survival over time.

The Importance of Longitudinal Studies of Competition

One of the major problems with most studies of the incumbency advantage is that they speak of “declining” competition, but base their conclusions on data from one or two elections. While Mayhew (1974b) did show that margins of victory had been

declining between the 1960s and 1970s, scholars did not make an effective case that turnover had declined over an extended period of time (and if vulnerability does not lead to some degree of turnover, then what do we mean by vulnerability?). Studies that focus on one or two elections and report that most of the incumbents won reelection fail to address the issue of *trends* in electoral competition.

A few scholars, however, have pointed to the advantages of longitudinal studies of competition. Jacobson (1987) examines electoral margins between 1952 and 1982 and finds that while margins of victory have increased for incumbents, they have also become more heterogeneous. Thus, while the average margin of victory may have increased, the “heterogeneity of interelection vote swings” has meant that individual incumbents may not feel any safer from one election to the next. A large margin in this election doesn’t ensure a large margin in the next one.

Gross and Garand (1984) examine an even longer time frame, looking at elections from 1824 to 1980. Their results suggest that margins of victory for all candidates, challenger and incumbent both, have been increasing over time. If we base our conception of the “incumbency advantage” on electoral margins, then Gross and Garand believe we have to reject the idea that there is an incumbency advantage at all. Instead the authors talk of a “winner’s advantage” in modern elections. By restricting their analysis to electoral margins, however, Gross and Garand fail to take full advantage of their time series.

Collie (1981) adopts a more original research strategy. She utilizes a quasi-experimental method, examining the margins of victory for 11 congressional cohorts

over three successive reelection bids in order to assess whether or not incumbency leads to greater margins of victory in successive bids. Her evidence suggests that there is not a clear pattern of increasing electoral safety over the course of several elections. Her study demonstrates the value of examining competition as a process that unfolds over time. However, Collie only looks at open seat winners and, like Jacobson and Gross and Garand, she limits her analysis to patterns of “marginality” rather than patterns of victory or defeat. In the coming chapters I will take a broader approach to studying competition over time and examine all incumbents with an emphasis on outcomes, rather than margins.

Conclusion

Electoral competition is an important, but often misunderstood, concept. Previous studies focusing on vote margins may fail to capture the true nature of competition in congressional elections. Failure to fully understand the nature of competition may cause scholars, and potential challengers, to overlook districts that have the potential to be competitive. Party strategists, in particular, may overlook opportunities to field strong challengers because they misinterpret an incumbent’s margin of victory as an indicator of insurmountable strength. It is probably a better strategy to examine a variety of variables related to electoral success in order to find a “weak link” in the incumbent’s defenses, rather than simply using margin of victory as a

heuristic for vulnerability. The opportunity for a competitive race probably exists in most districts; the trick is to find and exploit that opportunity.

One reason that competition seems to be so low in the United States may be that potential challengers are simply too cautious, biding their time for just the right moment, when they could probably mount a successful campaign much earlier. Such miscalculation may be the result of potential challengers overestimating the level of control incumbents have over their electoral fortunes. In the chapters that follow, I will examine the possibility that incumbents are less able to control their electoral fortunes than the literature suggests. I will argue that environmental factors, largely beyond the control of the incumbent, may play a more important role in determining competition. If challengers would broaden the scope of their strategizing, and adopt a bolder approach to challenging incumbents, the level of turnover in Congress (the ultimate indicator of competition) might rise.

CHAPTER III

A TALE OF TWO “DISTRICTINGS”

Introduction

The political science literature on congressional elections suggests candidate behavior is the key element influencing electoral competition. While behavior-based explanations of electoral competition are appealing because they accord well with normative theories of democratic responsiveness, the reality of electoral politics may be quite different. If incumbents can make their districts safe through constituent service, then incumbents should, on average, be quite confident of their prospects and exhibit little worry regarding the next election. But as Fenno (1978) notes, members of Congress rarely feel secure and indeed worry that electoral defeat may be just around the corner. It seems that members of Congress are much less sanguine about their efficacy than political scientists would lead us to believe. In this chapter, I examine the redistricting process in two very different states (Texas and Iowa) in order to gauge the perceived importance of the political environment to the participants in the electoral process. The evidence from these two cases suggests that members of Congress and state legislators both regard the district environment as the key to electoral success.

‘A Tale of Two Districts’ Revisited: The Case for Environmental Explanations

It does not require a great deal of imagination to understand the importance of environment to political survival. Just as a fish cannot survive out of the water, an incumbent finds survival impossible in a hostile political environment (*e.g.*, if the district overwhelmingly supports the other party). Similarly, as the fish may be able to struggle and cling to life for a short time out of the water, an incumbent may be able to stave off defeat for a short time before environmental factors win out. In the long run, however, fish cannot survive out of water, and incumbents who find themselves at odds with their political element will not be able to avoid defeat forever, despite their best efforts. My hypothesis, then, may be described as one of *environmental constraint*. Over time, the impact of member behavior on electoral success becomes constrained by environmental variables such that no amount of member “hustling” can stave off defeat if the political environment demands it.

In contrast, the traditional understanding of the relationship between incumbent behavior and electoral competition is quite different. For instance, in *Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establishment*, Morris Fiorina presents a case study entitled “A Tale of Two Districts” as an instructive example of two very similar districts that diverged electorally during the sixties; one district remained “marginal” (District A) while the other became “safe” (District B). Fiorina’s description suggests a close similarity between the districts in all areas save one -- the “home style” of the respective members. In District B, the newly elected member “hustles” casework in the district,

stressing constituency service and accessibility within the district rather than policy content, while in District A the member focuses more on the policymaking aspect of congressional service than the “errand boy,” constituency-service role. The basic implication of Fiorina’s argument is that a member of Congress can reduce electoral competition in his or her district by engaging in vigorous “servicing” of the district through the promotion of casework.

An interesting postscript to this tale, however, is that the member in District B was never considered safe by political elites within that district, and he was, in fact, defeated several elections later by the predicted challenger². The failure of this district to remain safe raises an interesting issue alluded to by Fenno (1978, 14) in *Home Style*: No matter how large the electoral margin received by the incumbent in the current election, “electoral trouble may be only a couple of elections away.” The political elites in District B clearly had some sense that the member was not suited to the district environment, despite his ability to survive for a time. In the end, the incumbent’s attentiveness to the district was not enough to prevent defeat.

While one cannot rely on the results of a single case as strong evidence in support of a theory, this case suggests that behavioral explanations are not sufficient to explain the incumbency advantage if we examine electoral competition over the course of many elections. Idiosyncrasies of particular elections may lead to the election of candidates who are ill-suited to the political environment of the district. Through diligent constituent service such a candidate may be able to stave off defeat in the next election,

² Verified through correspondence with the author.

and even the one after. In the long run, however, I believe that environmental forces are too powerful to be overcome. Over time, a better-suited candidate will emerge, or the candidate's voting record will become discrepant, and the "misfit" incumbent will be ousted.

In addition to the anecdotal evidence from districts "A" and "B", the case for behavioral explanations of the incumbency advantage also suffers from a number of logical flaws. For instance, if members of Congress can secure reelection through diligent constituent service, then why do parties fight so bitterly over the redistricting process? Given the heated redistricting battles that occur in most states every ten years (or more frequently, as in the case of Texas in 2003), it seems reasonable to assume that members of Congress, state legislators, and party organizations all recognize the primacy of the political environment in determining electoral outcomes.

Another logical inconsistency in behavioral explanations is the assumption that voters are aware enough of incumbent behavior to allow it to influence their voting decisions. Proponents of the casework hypothesis implicitly suggest that voters are attentive to their representatives' service efforts. The literature on voting behavior would suggest otherwise. As far back as Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954), scholars have observed that voters are not very knowledgeable about politics and are instead guided by heuristics such as party identification (Bartels 1996, Bartels 2000, Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960).

Yet another questionable assumption of behavioral explanations is that voters are swayed by positive experiences with incumbents, which in turn, motivate the voters to

support the incumbent. I believe this logic is inconsistent with human nature. People are rarely spurred into action by a job well done; rather, it is human nature to expect good service as the norm and be motivated to act only in its absence. For example, how often do diners at a restaurant actively seek out the manager to praise their server for outstanding service? Constituents, like diners, are probably more likely to complain about bad service than they are to praise excellent service.

There is compelling evidence suggesting that negative evaluations of candidates affect voter behavior. In a study combining both experimental data and survey data from the 1978 Pennsylvania gubernatorial race, Herstein (1981) finds that negative evaluations of candidates carried more weight with the voters than positive evaluations. Negative evaluations, according to Herstein (1981, 858), are “a crucial part of the voting-decision process” and produce better predictions of vote choice than positive evaluations. Studies of “anti-candidate” voting also suggest the power of negative evaluations on voting behavior (Gant and Davis 1984, Gant and Sigelman 1985, Sigelman and Gant 1989). Many voters vote against the candidate they dislike, rather than voting for the candidate they prefer. Indeed, the prevalence of negative advertising in election campaigns also seems to support the idea that negative evaluations are a powerful influence on voter behavior (Jacobson 2004, Sigelman and Gant 1989).

Even the logic on which part of the casework hypothesis is based suggests that constituents are motivated by negative feelings; Moon, Serra, and West (1993) find evidence that citizens who are dissatisfied with the bureaucracy are more likely to contact their member of Congress. According to the “casework hypothesis” (Fiorina

1977, 1989), citizen dissatisfaction with the bureaucracy provides the opportunity for incumbents to come to the aid of constituents and thus generate positive evaluations that win votes for the incumbent. The evidence that positive evaluations motivate voters to support the incumbent is fairly weak, however. Gant and Davis (1984) find that positive evaluations are no more likely than negative ones to spur turnout or shape vote choice. Similarly, Cover and Brumberg (1982) find that the positive effect of mailings to constituents is short-lived, and subsequent mailings to the same constituents have no impact at all on evaluations of incumbents.

Constituent evaluations of legislator service are probably more reactive than active in nature. Given the low political awareness of constituents, and the generally negative attitude most constituents have regarding Congress (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995), most voters probably adopt the view that “no news is good news.” If constituents do utilize a reactive approach to evaluation of the incumbent, the role of a quality challenger is to educate the voters as to the shortcomings of the incumbent, and stimulate a kind of “oversight” activity among voters in the district. Under this model, the behavior of constituents may be regarded as analogous to that of legislators under what McCubbins and Schwartz (1983) call the “fire alarm” model of congressional oversight. While constituents are not likely to engage in active oversight of their member of Congress, they will react to negative actions that catch their attention, such as scandal. Interestingly enough, Cover (1980) finds that members of Congress behave in exactly the same fashion. Incumbents who perceive themselves as vulnerable, such as those in “marginal” districts or those with very little seniority, respond with greater attentiveness

to the district. Thus, fear and/or loathing may be a key explanatory variable for both constituent *and* incumbent behavior.

Understanding the decision process of voters is important and should instruct our theories on congressional elections. We cannot simply assume that the correlation between diligent district service and large electoral margins is a causal one. Since there are compelling reasons to doubt that constituents are spurred by candidate behavior into supporting incumbents, it makes sense to examine alternative explanations. I believe that a brief examination of redistricting will underscore the importance of the political environment for electoral outcomes.

The 2003 Redistricting Battle in Texas

The redistricting battle that took place in the Texas state legislature in 2003 was the bitterest partisan debate in recent memory, and perhaps the most hard-fought debate over redistricting that our nation has ever seen. Although redrawing the district lines usually occurs only once every ten years, the Republican majority in the Texas legislature (at the suggestion of House Majority Leader Tom DeLay) decided to dispense with the court-drawn maps from the previous redistricting and draw new maps that would ensure a Republican congressional majority for Texas (and the nation). Republicans argued that since the majority of state and local offices were controlled by the Republican Party, the Democratic majority (17-15) in Texas' House delegation was unrepresentative of the preferences of the majority of Texans. Despite two quorum-

busting walkouts by Democratic legislators, the Republicans were ultimately successful in redrawing the district lines, and the courts have upheld the constitutionality of the new district lines.

The Texas redistricting saga is instructive in several ways. First, the magnitude of the struggle and the bitterness of the debate, both within Texas and on the national level, clearly suggest that politicians regard the structuring of the political environment as the most important step in securing electoral success. The lengths to which the Republicans were willing to go in order to ensure success speak volumes about the perceived importance of redistricting to electoral outcomes. First, the Texas Republicans bucked tradition by proposing the redrawing of district lines in the middle of an apportionment period; normal political practice dictates that the lines be redrawn once every ten years, after the decennial census. The Republicans then demonstrated a remarkable tenacity in pressing the issue over the course of three legislative sessions and two Democratic walkouts³. Ultimately, the normal rules of procedure in the Senate were suspended in order to push the plan through⁴. The Democrats were no less aggressive in their opposition, as evidenced by the flight of several members from the state in two separate instances in order to break quorum and prevent a vote from taking place. The Democratic opposition was also aggressive in its use of litigation to oppose the newly drawn districts in the courts once the maps were passed by the legislature.

³ When the measure failed at the end of the regular session, Governor Rick Perry ordered a special session (which again failed), and then another until the measure finally passed both chambers of the legislature.

⁴ Normally, a two-thirds vote of the Senate is required before any new legislation will be considered.

Another important inference that can be gleaned from the Texas saga is that redistricting battles, while fought in the state political arena, are of national importance and attract the attention, and even participation, of national government officials. Tom DeLay's active participation in the redistricting battle clearly demonstrates the importance of redistricting to national leaders. Participants on both sides of the debate were intensely aware of the national significance of the outcome. One Republican House staffer was quoted in the *Houston Chronicle* as saying that the Texas redistricting "is the most aggressive I have ever seen. This has a real national impact that should assure that Republicans keep the House no matter the national mood" (Masterson 2003).

The national impact should extend beyond the results of the 2004 elections. The success of the Texas redistricting will surely inspire many other states to reevaluate their own districts. Colorado and Ohio have already begun talk of redistricting, and other states are likely to follow.

Obviously, the political actors involved believe that redistricting has profound implications for electoral outcomes. There is also some scholarly evidence that redistricting usually benefits incumbents and leads to a decline in competition (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2000). Another useful approach to the question may be to compare states with heavily politicized redistricting processes (in which legislatures are responsible for drawing district lines) with states that use a non-partisan board or commission to draw district lines. Conventional wisdom suggests that states that use a non-partisan board are more likely to have competitive races than states that rely on their legislatures for redistricting.

The Use of Independent Redistricting Boards and Commissions

A brief review of the recent history of redistricting in the state of Iowa may provide a useful counterpoint to the politically charged process in Texas. While the state of Texas chose to respond to court intervention in the redistricting process with further gerrymandering, Iowa chose instead to institute a technocratic solution that reduced the effects of partisan politics. As a result, many observers believe that Iowa's congressional races are more competitive than those of other states (Beinart 2002).

The modern era of judicial intervention in redistricting can be traced back to the early 1960s. In *Baker v. Carr* (1962), the Supreme Court "ruled that a person could challenge, and seek judicial redress for, an allegedly improper redistricting plan" (Legislative Services Bureau of the State of Iowa 2000). As a result, states were compelled to follow constitutional and statutory requirements or be subject to having the courts draw up their plans. The *Baker* ruling had a direct impact on Iowa's 1970 redistricting. According to the Iowa Supreme Court, the legislature's 1970 plan failed to meet the constitutional requirements of "equal population" and "compact and contiguous territory" and the court redrew the districts.

Apparently wishing to avoid a repeat of the 1970 experience, the Iowa legislature in 1980 enacted House File 707 "to establish a statutory process for drawing legislative and congressional districts in Iowa following each decennial census, beginning with the 1980 census" (Legislative Services Bureau of the State of Iowa 2000). This procedure was codified in Iowa Code Chapter 42 and provided that the Legislative Service Bureau (LSB) would be responsible for creating the districts, subject to legislative and

gubernatorial approval. The statute outlines both “proper” and “improper” factors that may or may not be considered during the redistricting process. Partisan gerrymandering is effectively eliminated since the LSB may not consider data concerning incumbents’ addresses, political affiliation of voters, previous election results, and demographic data other than raw population.

In advance of the LSB recommendations, the General Assembly appoints a Temporary Redistricting Advisory committee that will consider the plan, hold public hearings, and communicate their findings to the General Assembly. This general process may be repeated three times if necessary until a plan is adopted or the state supreme court will take over.

Critics of the independent commission approach to redistricting argue that such commissions take control away from citizens by placing redistricting power in the hands of unelected civil servants. Many believe that independent commissions are only a marginal improvement over the courts. It is not at all clear, however, that allowing legislatures to draw the lines ensures citizen control over, or even satisfaction with, the redistricting process. For instance, when Texas held a series of public hearings on the 2003 redistricting plan, large groups of citizens rallied in protest (Castro 2003) and public opinion polls indicated that a majority of Texans opposed the redistricting plans (Elliott 2003).

Supporters of the commission approach contend that the depoliticization of the redistricting process enhances electoral competition, thereby ensuring greater citizen influence on elections. While normative arguments over the value of independent

redistricting commissions are open to debate, the effect of such commissions on competition is an empirical question. A comparison of data from post-1980 elections in Iowa and Texas should provide a crude indication of the effect of independent commissions on competition.

If gerrymandering in Texas does, in fact, lead to greater electoral safety for incumbents, then we should expect the mean values for vote percentage and district partisanship (measured by the “normal vote”) to be larger for incumbents in Texas than those in Iowa. Furthermore, I expect that challenger spending should be greater in Iowa than in Texas, since incumbents should be more vulnerable in the Iowa districts. Greater competitiveness in Iowa should also lead to a greater incidence of facing an experienced challenger, of winning with less than 55% of the vote (“marginal win”), and of being defeated.

Table 3.1 compares the mean values for several relevant election variables for Iowa and Texas⁵. The average vote percentage won by Iowa incumbents from 1980 to 2000 was 60.66 percent, compared with 64.20 percent for Texas incumbents. While the percentage for Texas is higher than Iowa, as expected, the figure is slightly smaller than expected due to the presence of two scandal-plagued incumbents who lost their reelection bids. Representative Bustamante won only 38 percent of the vote in 1992, when he was facing racketeering charges and was involved in the House Bank scandal. Representative Sarpalius won only 45 percent of the vote in 1994 due to his involvement

⁵ Electoral and demographic data for this chapter were obtained from the *Almanac of American Politics* (Barone and Ujifusa 1982-2002).

Table 3.1**Comparison of Electoral Variables in Iowa and Texas, 1982-2000**

	Iowa	Texas
<i>Mean:</i>		
<i>Vote Percentage</i>	60.66	64.20
<i>Challenger Spending</i>	185.81	147.56
<i>Partisanship</i>	-1.54	6.09
N	26	87

in the so-called “moving-gate” scandal. Excluding these two outliers raises the mean to 64.46 for Texas.

Even including the two “scandalized” Texas cases, challengers in Iowa spent an average of \$6,519 more on their campaigns than challengers in Texas, suggesting that districts in Texas are regarded as less competitive by those who actually participate in the elections. District partisanship also seems to favor incumbents from Texas -- the “normal vote” for the district was 8.5 percent higher for incumbents in Texas.

Table 3.2 compares the incidence of facing an experienced challenger, of being defeated, and of winning with less than 55 percent of the vote. In Iowa, 31 percent of incumbents face an experienced challenger when seeking reelection, compared with only 10.3% in Texas. Surprisingly, however, a higher percentage of Texas incumbents were defeated than in Iowa (3.6% to 2.0%). However, if we throw out the cases of Bustamante and Sarpalius, the difference is much smaller (2.6% for Texas, versus 2.0% for Iowa). The incidence of a marginal win is higher in Iowa than in Texas (14.3% to 8.9%). Again,

Table 3.2**Electoral Outcomes in Iowa and Texas, 1982-2000**

<i>Incidence of:</i>	Iowa	Texas
<i>Experienced Challenger</i>	31.1 %	10.3 %
<i>Defeat</i>	2.0 %	3.6 %
<i>Marginal Win</i>	14.3 %	8.9 %
N	26	87

the results suggest that Iowa incumbents face a much more electorally dangerous environment relative to Texas.

Further evidence of the effects of partisan redistricting on electoral outcomes might be gained from comparing electoral results from pre-commission Iowa with post-commission Iowa. Unfortunately, however, the data that are available to me at present begin with the 1972 elections, making it impossible to compare Iowa's legislative redistricting process with its current commission-based redistricting. Since the Iowa districts of the seventies were drawn by the state supreme court, the data from the seventies will not tell us much about the legislative redistricting that occurred before the courts intervened. In fact, the data from the seventies suggests that court-based districting in Iowa may lead to even greater competition than a non-partisan commission – the average vote percentage for Iowa incumbents in the seventies was only 58.26 percent (compared with 67.68 percent for Texas). The Watergate scandal may be partly responsible for the low vote percentage for Iowa incumbents in the seventies, however, so we should probably avoid reading too much into that figure.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed redistricting as a practical example of the value American politicians place on the political environment. Congressional and state legislative leaders seem to regard redistricting as the surest way to influence electoral outcomes, based on the amount of energy they put forth to determine the shape of congressional districts.

Comparing post-1980 electoral outcomes from Texas, which uses a highly politicized legislative redistricting process, and Iowa, which uses an independent commission, suggests that the power to shape the district political environment can indeed influence electoral outcomes. In the case of Texas it seems that party leaders are not misguided in their demonstrated belief that gerrymandering matters.

While the cases examined here provide interesting anecdotal evidence of the importance of environment on electoral competition, further analysis is needed before any strong inferences can be made about the relative influence of environmental and behavioral factors on competition. In Chapter IV, I will begin a more thorough examination of the impact of the political environment on the electorally relevant variables discussed in Chapter II. Finally, in Chapter V I will assess the role of environmental factors on electoral outcomes controlling for candidate behavior.

CHAPTER IV

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRAINT AND ELECTORAL COMPETITION

Introduction

In Chapter III, the redistricting process was presented as a practical example of the importance politicians place on the district environment. Particularly in the case of Texas, control over the district environment is perceived by legislators to be a key factor in determining electoral outcomes. The data suggest that this perception is probably correct. In this chapter, I take a more thorough look at the effects of the political environment on several key components of electoral competition from 1972 to 2000⁶.

Re-examining Electoral Competition as a Process

The congressional elections literature uses two broad categories of variables to explain electoral competition: *behavioral* variables, which are within the candidates' control, and *environmental* variables, which are beyond the candidates' control. Although previous research has contributed to our knowledge in this field, a myriad of questions remain either unanswered or only partially explored. In this chapter, I argue that environmental variables are of primary interest and we need to focus on the dynamics of electoral competition. Environmental factors in congressional elections

⁶ Electoral and demographic data for this chapter were obtained from the *Almanac of American Politics* (Barone and Ujifusa 1972-2002) except where noted otherwise.

have very important implications for the manner in which we study electoral competition, especially with respect to time. I seek to demonstrate the need to examine electoral competition over the course of several elections, rather than only one.

I believe that two serious problems have plagued previous research. First, previous studies have not paid adequate attention to sociopolitical characteristics of the district that may limit the effectiveness of an incumbent's best efforts. Incumbent behavior does not occur in a vacuum; it occurs within the context of a political environment that can either enhance or limit its effectiveness. Thus, careful attention must be paid to the interactive effects of environment on candidate behavior if we are to fully understand the relationship between candidate behavior and electoral competition.

A second problem facing elections researchers relates to time. Previous studies of the impact of such variables as casework and policy responsiveness have tended to focus on single, discrete elections rather than over a consecutive series of elections. Such a static approach may lead to spurious results based on the idiosyncrasies of a particular election; the single election approach may miss many vulnerable incumbents. Analyzing competition over a longer period reduces the possibility of such error by providing a more complete picture of the relationship between environment and behavior. Scholars who have employed a longitudinal analysis, such as Born (1979), Collie, (1981), and Gelman and King (1990), Banks and Kiewiet (1989), Cox and Katz (1996), and Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2000), have generally either restricted their analysis to a subset of cases (redistricted seats) or restricted their focus to explaining challenger quality or incumbency advantage, rather than electoral outcomes. While these studies

have greatly enhanced our understanding of congressional elections, they have failed to directly address the effect of environmental factors on electoral outcomes in all districts over the course of many elections.

Electoral competition is best understood as a *process* which unfolds over several elections, rather than a discrete characteristic of each separate election. Electorates are notoriously uninformed and disinterested in politics (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960; Converse 1964; Zaller 1992; Bartels 1996), so it is not hard to understand why it may take a period of time longer than one election for a political “misfit” to be “found out” and voted out of office. Quality challengers provide an essential informational role in this process, “educating” district voters about the inadequacies of the incumbent. But politically experienced challengers are a cautious lot, and will patiently wait for what they feel is the best moment to mount a challenge. As Jacobson and Kernell (1983) point out, rational challengers will act strategically, assessing their prospects well in advance of the actual race in order to ensure that they have a realistic chance of competing (also, Banks and Kiewiet 1989). Thus, in order to understand the process of competition as it unfolds, we must consider a longer period of time than a single electoral cycle.

The political environment of the district can be characterized in different ways. One of the most popular ways of describing the district environment is in terms of constituency diversity. The socioeconomic makeup of the district is an important element of electoral competition that is beyond the control of the candidate. Constituency diversity has traditionally been thought to increase the competitiveness of

districts, but the literature has failed to yield convincing empirical support for this conclusion (Bond 1983, Bond, Covington, and Fleisher 1985, Krasno 1994). Koetzle (1998) has argued that it is political diversity, rather than socioeconomic diversity, that is important. More recent research has suggested that diversity may be best understood as a contextual factor, rather than a causal one (Bond, Campbell, and Cottrill 2001).

Similarly, the overall district environment is also best understood as a contextual factor that may either enhance or inhibit the effectiveness of candidate behavior.

Fenno (1978) characterizes the district environment in terms of “prepolitical” factors which set the outside parameters for electoral competition and involve more than just district diversity. The demographic characteristics of a district, whether homogeneous or heterogeneous, may favor one type of candidate or party over all others, and this ‘predisposition’ constrains the ability of candidates’ to shape their own electoral fortunes, or ‘make their own luck’ so to speak. Some candidates may find themselves in an idyllic, electorally friendly environment where their activities nearly always generate high levels of support. Others may find themselves in an inhospitable political jungle, fraught with electoral danger, where even their best efforts help them survive for only a short time.

Characterizing Environmental Constraint

In Chapter III, I describe my conception of competition as an “environmental constraint” hypothesis. By environmental constraint, I mean that the effectiveness of

member behavior is dramatically affected by characteristics of the political environment. Variables such as campaign spending and casework may be either more or less effective depending on the nature of the incumbent's environment, that is, whether it is friendly or hostile. I do not mean to suggest that behavior does not matter, but rather to show that behavior does not occur in a vacuum; behavior interacts with the environment such that the same behavior by two different members of Congress might have vastly different effects depending on their district environment.

The single most important environmental factor influencing the vote is the partisan disposition of the district. Indeed, one of the bedrock principles guiding our understanding of voting behavior is that party identification is the best predictor of vote choice (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960; Miller 1991; Bartels 2000). Furthermore, the literature on the "vanishing marginals" and "incumbency advantage" generally concedes that the partisan disposition of the district is still the primary determinant of the vote; Fiorina (1977), for example, notes that the increase in average vote margins during the period in which he and Mayhew (1974b) observed the "vanishing marginals" and which he later attributes to the "personal vote" (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987), was very small. King (1991) also points out that the "incumbency effect" is only a small part of the overall vote, and so scholars who study the incumbency advantage must separate the "incumbency effect" from the partisan leanings of the district. Thus, some of the extant literature implicitly supports the view that partisan environment is the most important determinant of the vote. If we know how

the two-party vote usually plays out in the district, we have a fairly good indication of what the electoral environment looks like for each party's candidate.

Given our current understanding of district partisanship, I believe three possibilities exist for environmental constraint. The first possibility is a relatively even partisan split, meaning that the district should be competitive for candidates of either party. In these districts, incumbents and challengers might be expected to be on a more level playing field. Another possibility is that a district may lean Democratic, which would mean a friendly environment for the Democratic candidate and a hostile one for the Republican. In such a district a Republican incumbent may find that all his efforts at diligent constituency service fail to pay off at the polls. The final possibility is that the district may lean Republican, meaning a favorable environment for the Republican candidate and a hostile one for the Democrat. Thus, a Democratic incumbent might find that all his best efforts are for naught.

What does this mean for competition from the incumbent's perspective? It means environmental trouble can come in one of two forms. In the first case, a district with a relatively even partisan split should be "in play" for either party at election time, meaning the incumbent should be vulnerable to a vigorous challenge. The second form of trouble occurs in a district that elects a "misfit" incumbent who is not of the party usually preferred by the district; an incumbent whose party is the minority within the district will be more likely to attract strong challengers and less likely to be able to make the district safe through attentive constituent service. If we are looking for competitive districts, districts that have the potential for partisan change (or at the very least

marginality), *these* are the districts we should be scrutinizing. These are the districts where the influence of the environment on behavioral variables should be the most pronounced.

Assessing Environmental Constraint: Measures and Research Design

Gauging district partisanship can be a problematic venture. District-level presidential vote returns are a flawed measure because they are greatly influenced by national partisan tides, personal qualities of the candidates and strong campaign effects. A composite measure using electoral returns for a combination of local, state, and national offices would be best, but the necessary data are not readily obtainable. Normal vote measures are an improvement over simple presidential vote returns and are easily calculated. The normal vote takes the average of the incumbent's party's presidential vote in the last two (or more, in the case of Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2000) elections and subtracts the national average for those same two elections in order to roughly estimate the strength of district partisanship relative to the national average. Recognizing that strong third party challenges, as in 1968, 1980, 1992, and 1996, can affect this measure, I calculate the normal vote using the percentage of the two-party vote rather than the raw vote percentages. For the purposes of this study, I will use the normal vote to divide districts into three environmental categories in order to get a general idea of how environmental differences affect electoral outcomes.

Since some critics may still be skeptical of the normal vote's reliance on presidential vote returns, I also utilize a new measure of district partisan preferences developed by Lynda Powell (2002). Powell estimates a logistic regression model using demographic characteristics of each district in addition to presidential vote in the last two elections as explanatory variables, to indicate the probability that a district would elect a Republican if the seat were an open seat. This measure should provide a good baseline for the partisan leanings of the district, and I expect that it will provide results that strongly resemble those produced using the normal vote categories. Indeed, if the Powell measure provides results that are closely similar to those obtained by the normal vote measure we may reasonably conclude that the normal vote measure is a valid indicator of district partisanship.

One way to categorize the political environment would be to divide districts into two broad categories based on the general strength of partisan support in the district. For example, districts with a Powell score between .4 and .6 could be characterized as "in play" for either party, while all other districts would be classified as "solid" for one party or the other (*i.e.*, districts scoring higher than .6 are "strongly Republican" and those scoring less than .4 are "strongly Democratic"). Conventional wisdom would suggest that incumbents from "in play" districts should find themselves in electoral trouble more often than those from "solid" districts.

The problem with this classification, however, is that it fails to account for political "misfits" who, through whatever quirk of electoral fate, find themselves representing a district that favors the other party (*e.g.*, the election of large numbers of

Democrats from Republican districts in 1974). To account for this, I instead create three environmental categories indicating whether the incumbent is in a hostile, marginal, or friendly political environment. Using the normal vote measure, I classify districts with a normal vote of -3 or below in the hostile category, those with a normal vote of 3 or above in the friendly category, and all other cases as marginal. I also create identical categories using a transformed version of the Powell measure; I transform this measure to orient it to the incumbent's party so that I have an indicator of the probability of the incumbent's party winning the election if the seat were open.⁷ Districts scoring $.4$ or lower are classified as hostile, those scoring $.6$ or greater are considered friendly, and those that are in between are considered marginal.

Having identified these environmental categories, I will compare several variables of interest to see if they vary predictably across categories.

My first expectation is that incumbents in hostile environments (marginal and hostile categories) should face a viable challenger more frequently than those in other districts (following Jacobson and Kernell 1983). This relationship is vital to my theory since quality challengers serve as a catalyst for voter awareness of the incumbent's record and are a necessary condition for electoral competition. If the data do not indicate a greater incidence of facing a viable challenge in hostile environments, then there will be strong reason to suspect the categorization is not valid. Following Jacobson (1981, 2004), my indicator of challenger viability ("quality") is a simple dichotomous measure of whether or not the challenger has previous political experience.

⁷ Since the Powell score indicates the probability of election a Republican if the seat were open, I simply recode all Democrats as $1 - P$, where P is the Powell partisanship score.

It should be noted here that the use of previous political experience as an indicator of challenger quality is not without its critics. Arnold and Hawkins (2002) provide a detailed critique of existing measures of challenger quality, charging that these measures are based on arbitrary distinctions and lack empirical justification, rendering them crude indicators at best. The Arnold-Hawkins measure, however, is derived from statistically questionable procedures, is not available for challengers who face incumbents, and, in any case, represents only a marginal improvement over Jacobson's simple dichotomy. Thus, despite the relative crudeness of the Jacobson measure, I believe it serves as a valuable baseline distinction between viable challengers and those who stand little chance of unseating an incumbent.

My second expectation is that all of the standard indicators of electoral trouble – defeat, marginality, retirement⁸ -- will be greater in hostile environments. With the exception of retirement, which encompasses a variety of idiosyncratic factors, this expectation should not be controversial. When the partisanship of the district opposes the incumbent, he or she should be more likely to be defeated or win by only a small margin. Similarly, the average vote percentage for incumbents should be lower in hostile environments, as should the Powell indicator of the incumbent's party strength in the district relative to the national partisan trend.

To capture behavioral differences across environments, I compare mean levels of incumbent and challenger spending for each category. My expectation for challenger spending is fairly straightforward; challengers facing incumbents in hostile environments

⁸ Recognizing that there are many reasons for retirement, I separate "pure" retirements from those who leave Congress to pursue another elective office ("ambition").

should spend more, while challengers facing incumbents in friendly districts are not likely to spend much (if anything) on a campaign that has little hope for success. Also, challengers in districts that are friendly to the incumbent probably find fund-raising a difficult prospect to begin with, and it is hard to spend what you cannot raise in the first place.

Incumbent spending is a bit more complicated, however. Rational incumbents with perfect information, and focused only on the election at hand, should spend more liberally when they face the greatest challenge (*i.e.*, in hostile districts), while incumbents facing weak (or no) challengers should spend next to nothing. The difficulty is that incumbents do not have perfect information and their spending behavior may be influenced by the perception of a possible threat in a future election. Fenno (1978) notes that incumbents rarely feel safe even in the friendliest of environments and, in any case, it is no doubt preferable to spend too much money than too little. It should also be noted that a great deal of fund raising takes place before incumbents know whom their challenger will be. In this atmosphere of uncertainty it is rational to raise as much money as possible in order to prepare for every eventuality. Once the campaign season is in full swing, it is too late to begin raising money.

Krasno and Green (1988) also note the “preemptive” nature of incumbent spending. Even if an incumbent is uncertain of the nature of the challenge he or she will face, it is rational to signal one’s strength through successful fund raising and conspicuous campaign spending. Of course, not all campaign spending by incumbents is preemptive. Sometimes it is driven by an accurate assessment of the severity of the

challenge. Jacobson (1978, 2004) finds that the highest spenders among incumbents are the most likely to lose, which tempers the argument somewhat. Incumbents who perceive themselves as *most* vulnerable (as indicated by their level of spending) are usually the most accurate in their assessment (as indicated by being defeated). Thus, while we must be aware of the importance of incumbents' imperfect perceptions of vulnerability, we must also recognize that these perceptions are often entirely accurate. High spending incumbents are not just being paranoid in many cases.

Based on the inherent uncertainty regarding what drives incumbent spending, I believe that incumbent spending may not exhibit as much variation across categories as challenger spending. Incumbents do not have the advantage of perfect information regarding the strength of their opponent, whereas challengers do. Due to informational asymmetries between incumbents and challengers, I think that there will be greater and more predictable variation in challenger spending than in incumbent spending. Even so, I suspect incumbent spending should be at least slightly greater in hostile environments than in friendly ones.

The final behavioral indicator I examine is ideological discrepancy, a somewhat controversial measure (more to follow on that) which estimates how closely an incumbent's voting record represents the preferences of the district. Discrepancy scores range from 0 to 5.22, with 0 indicating high congruence with estimated district preferences and 5 suggesting a low congruence with estimated district ideology. I expect that incumbents from hostile environments will find it difficult to represent the

ideological preferences of the district and will have a higher mean discrepancy score than incumbents from friendly environments.

A few words of explanation about the construction of the ideological discrepancy measure are needed here. Since we have no direct indicator of both district ideological preferences and member ideology (aside from Miller and Stokes 1958 study) that we can use to assess the level of congruence between a member's voting record and district preferences, I use an indirect measure used by Bond and Hanna (1999). This measure consists of the residuals from a regression equation in which member ideology, represented by DW-Nominate scores (Poole and Rosenthal 2000), is estimated as a function of the district presidential vote in the last two elections and a host of demographic variables known to be correlated with ideology.⁹ The residuals represent how far incumbents' ideological behavior diverges from the model's estimate of constituency preferences.

While the use of this measure is controversial, I believe it is defensible and, indeed, contributes significantly to the study of electoral competition. Kugler (1983) lays out several conditions that must be met in order to use residuals as an indirect measure:

- a. The impact of the targeted variable must be sufficiently large to dominate the size and variations of the residual term.
- b. The hypothesized relationship among the dependent variable, the measured explanatory variables, and the variable associated with the concept to be tested must be accurately specified.
- c. The targeted variable must be statistically independent of the measured elements in the estimating equation.

⁹ Separate models were run for each decade studied. These models explain between 50 and 60 percent of the variance in member ideology. Demographic variables included in the model are: percent over 65, percent living in urban area, percent owning a home, percent black, percent unemployed, percent college educated, and dummy variables for each election year. Recognizing that politics in the north and south were significantly different over the period studied, I estimated separate slopes for the north and south.

- d. The residuals must behave empirically in concordance with the theoretical expectations engendered by the concept to be tested (106).

I believe that these conditions are met in this case. The use of residuals is especially appropriate here because of the nature of the concept we seek to estimate. Ideological discrepancy represents the error in an incumbent's estimation of district preferences. Similarly, residuals represent the error in estimating the regression line for district preferences. The estimated regression line is not a perfect representation of the district's ideological preferences, nor does it need to be. Voter opinion is notoriously fuzzy and unreliable to begin with (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992), so much so that survey data rarely provide results that we would regard as conclusive beyond reproach. However, since "error" is the very concept we seek to measure, and there is no direct way to measure this error through conventional survey techniques, I believe this procedure is defensible in this case.

Preliminary Evidence for Environmental Constraint: Results and Discussion

Table 4.1 presents the results for environmental categories using the normal vote measure.¹⁰ As expected, both categorizations tell the same story: incumbents in hostile districts are much more vulnerable to electoral trouble than those in friendly districts. These figures confirm expectations dramatically, strongly suggesting that these categories accurately capture the political environment. Incumbents in hostile

¹⁰ Separate analyses were conducted for all tables and figures using categories based on the Powell partisanship scores. As expected, the results were nearly identical, so I have chosen to only report the results obtained using the normal vote-based categories. The Powell-based results are available on request.

Table 4.1

Comparison of Electoral Variables Across District Environments, 1972-2000

	'Hostile' Districts	'Marginal' Districts	'Friendly' Districts	'Competition' Gap
<i>Incidence of:</i>				
<i>Quality Challenger</i>	34.1 %	27.1 %	15.5 %	18.6 %
<i>Defeat</i>	10.2 %	5.3 %	2.9 %	7.3 %
<i>Marginal Win</i>	17.7 %	13.4 %	6.2 %	11.5 %
<i>Retirement</i>	6.0 %	5.1 %	5.1 %	.9 %
<i>Ambition</i>	4.0 %	3.4 %	2.6 %	1.4 %
<i>Mean:</i>				
<i>Vote Percentage</i>	64.69 %	66.48 %	72.68 %	7.99 %
<i>Incumbent Spending</i>	322.77	330.61	257.59	65.18
<i>Challenger Spending</i>	173.99	144.07	67.74	106.25
<i>Powell Measure</i>	.36	.52	.79	.43
<i>Ideological Discrepancy</i>	.90	.79	.52	.38
N	1013	1712	3800	

environments are more than twice as likely to face a quality challenger than those from friendly districts, and they are more than three times as likely to be defeated. The mean challenger spending figure is more than twice as large in hostile districts, demonstrating once again that challengers behave rationally by targeting incumbents who are most vulnerable. The mean discrepancy score is also slightly larger in hostile districts, providing a bit of circumstantial evidence that it is more difficult to represent a hostile district than a friendly one.

Recognizing that one of the chief advantages of a longitudinal data set is that one can examine changes over time, I have also examined these data separately for each decade in my study. Since redistricting can have a profound effect on the electoral

fortunes of incumbents I believe it is important to see if there have been systematic changes in electoral outcomes across decades. If the extant literature is to be believed, we should expect that the number of “friendly” districts is increasing and that “hostile” districts are becoming an endangered species.

Tables 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 present the results for the seventies, eighties, and nineties, respectively. Comparing the figures for each decade, we see that the number of hostile cases has declined from 408 to 310 to 295 over the last three decades, while friendly cases have risen from 1158 to 1256 to 1386. Inspection of the electoral variables by decade suggests that the “competition gap” between hostile and friendly districts has steadily increased over time. As the number of hostile districts has decreased, the level of “hostility” experienced within these districts has risen relative to their friendly counterparts. The gap between the incidence of facing a quality challenger in hostile versus friendly districts has grown from 14.5% in the seventies to 17.2% in the eighties to 24.2% in the nineties. The gap for defeats has grown from 4.4% to 6.3% to 11% during the same period. This pattern is repeated for the other variables over the time period examined, as the “Competition Gap” column for each table indicates.

Table 4.2

Comparison of Electoral Variables Across District Environments, 1972-1980

	'Hostile' Districts	'Marginal' Districts	'Friendly' Districts	'Competition' Gap
<i>Incidence of:</i>				
<i>Quality Challenger</i>	33.5 %	31.3 %	19.0 %	14.5 %
<i>Defeat</i>	9.8 %	5.9 %	5.4 %	4.4 %
<i>Marginal Win</i>	16.7 %	10.0 %	7.4 %	9.3 %
<i>Retirement</i>	7.4 %	7.4 %	6.2 %	1.2 %
<i>Ambition</i>	3.4 %	4.1 %	3.4 %	--
<i>Mean:</i>				
<i>Vote Percentage</i>	67.08 %	68.12 %	70.93 %	3.85 %
<i>Incumbent Spending</i>	174.24	156.99	135.06	39.18
<i>Challenger Spending</i>	130.92	95.37	58.75	72.18
<i>Powell Measure</i>	.46	.58	.72	.26
<i>Ideological Discrepancy</i>	.80	.72	.52	.28
N	408	579	1158	

Table 4.3

Comparison of Electoral Variables Across District Environments, 1982-1990

	'Hostile' Districts	'Marginal' Districts	'Friendly' Districts	'Competition' Gap
<i>Incidence of:</i>				
<i>Quality Challenger</i>	30.2 %	23.9 %	13.0 %	17.2 %
<i>Defeat</i>	8.1 %	4.6 %	1.8 %	6.3 %
<i>Marginal Win</i>	13.9 %	11.2 %	4.9 %	9.0 %
<i>Retirement</i>	1.6 %	3.1 %	3.7 %	2.1 %
<i>Ambition</i>	4.8 %	3.2 %	2.9 %	1.9 %
<i>Mean:</i>				
<i>Vote Percentage</i>	66.23 %	68.16 %	74.83 %	8.6 %
<i>Incumbent Spending</i>	363.17	328.98	262.02	101.15
<i>Challenger Spending</i>	165.10	123.72	63.81	101.29
<i>Powell Measure</i>	.37	.55	.79	.42
<i>Ideological Discrepancy</i>	1.01	.80	.53	.48
N	310	589	1256	

Table 4.4

Comparison of Electoral Variables Across District Environments, 1992-2000

	'Hostile' Districts	'Marginal' Districts	'Friendly' Districts	'Competition' Gap
<i>Incidence of:</i>				
<i>Quality Challenger</i>	38.9 %	26.4 %	14.7 %	24.2 %
<i>Defeat</i>	12.9 %	5.2 %	1.9 %	11.0 %
<i>Marginal Win</i>	23.1 %	22.4 %	6.5 %	16.6 %
<i>Retirement</i>	8.8 %	5.2 %	5.3 %	3.5 %
<i>Ambition</i>	4.1 %	3.4 %	1.6 %	2.5 %
<i>Mean:</i>				
<i>Vote Percentage</i>	59.63 %	62.26 %	72.11 %	12.48 %
<i>Incumbent Spending</i>	479.46	535.47	347.33	137.13
<i>Challenger Spending</i>	242.68	229.04	78.26	164.42
<i>Powell Measure</i>	.22	.51	.86	.64
<i>Ideological Discrepancy</i>	.93	.88	.50	.43
N	295	464	1386	

Thus, we have some preliminary evidence to suggest that environment matters; but how does this process unfold over successive re-election bids? To provide a rough indication of the answer to this question, I compiled electoral outcome data for each congressional class (cohort) from 1972-2000 comparing the incidence of defeat, facing a quality challenger, and a marginal win over three successive reelection bids for each environmental category.¹¹ Figure 4.1 presents the aggregate results for each re-election bid in a histogram, while Figures 4.2 through 4.4 display the results for the seventies, eighties, and nineties respectively.

¹¹ Although I have electoral data through the year 2000, the class of 1994 was the last cohort for which three successive re-election bids could be examined; *i.e.*, for the class of 1996, data were only available for two re-election bids (1998, 2000), and so on.

Figure 4.1

Comparison of Electoral Outcomes over Three Successive Re-election Bids for Three Types of District Environment, 1972-2000

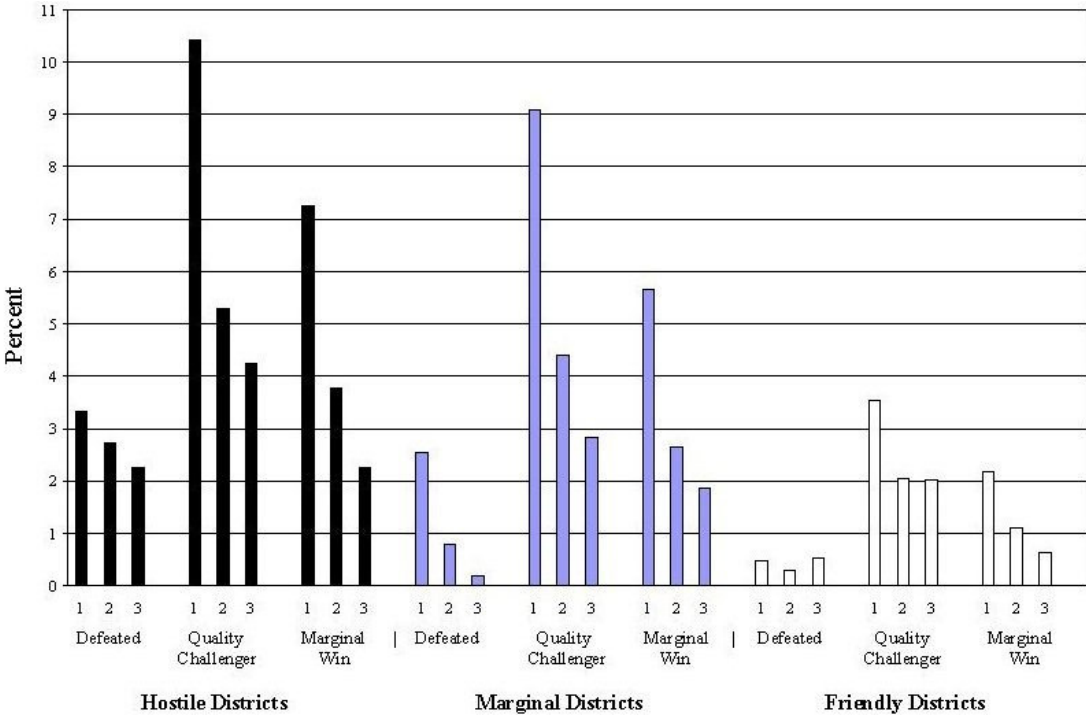


Figure 4.2

Comparison of Electoral Outcomes over Three Successive Re-election Bids for Three Types of District Environment, 1972-1980

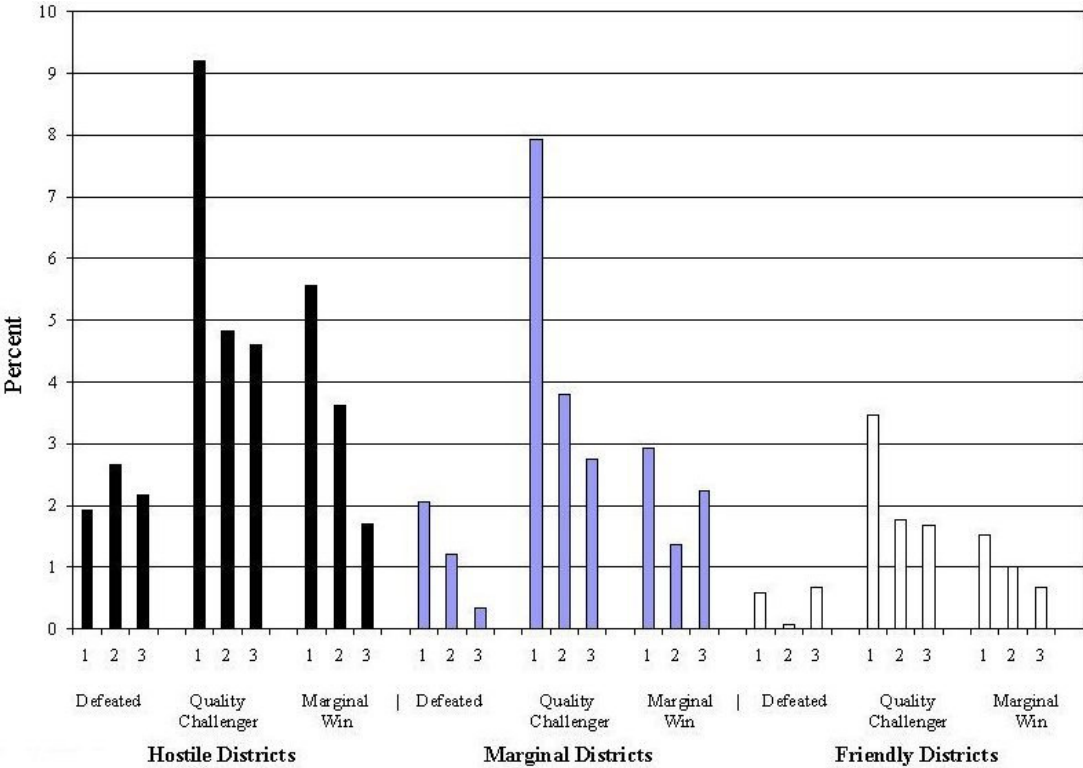


Figure 4.3

Comparison of Electoral Outcomes over Three Successive Re-election Bids for Three Types of District Environment, 1982-1990

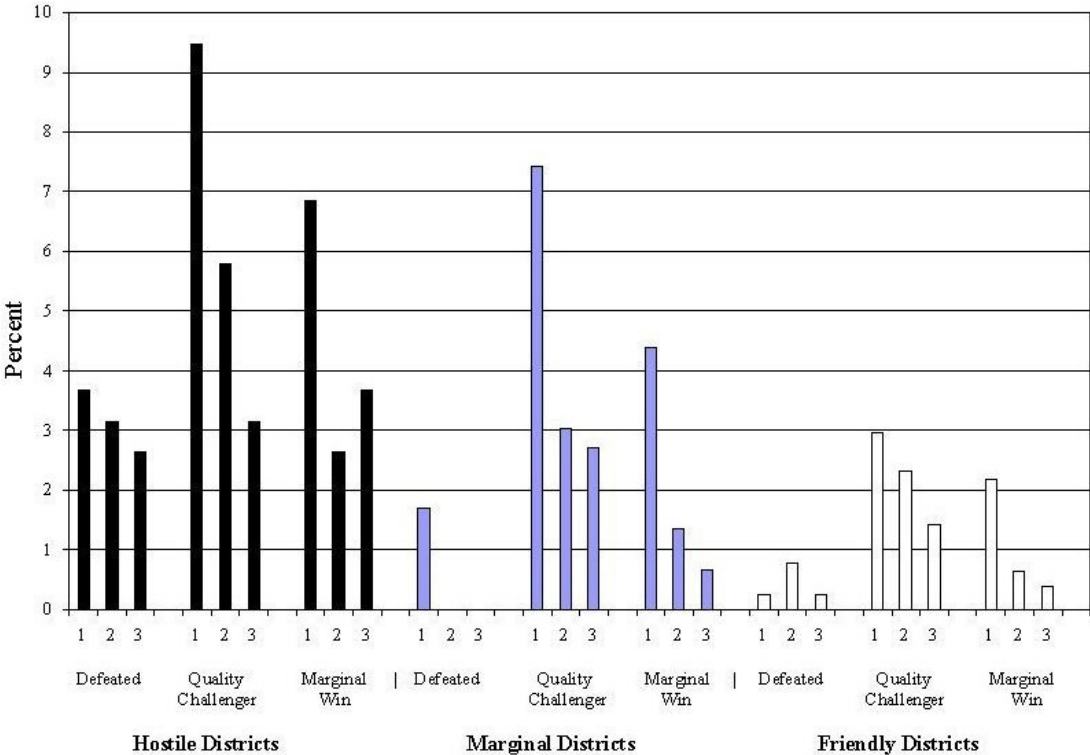
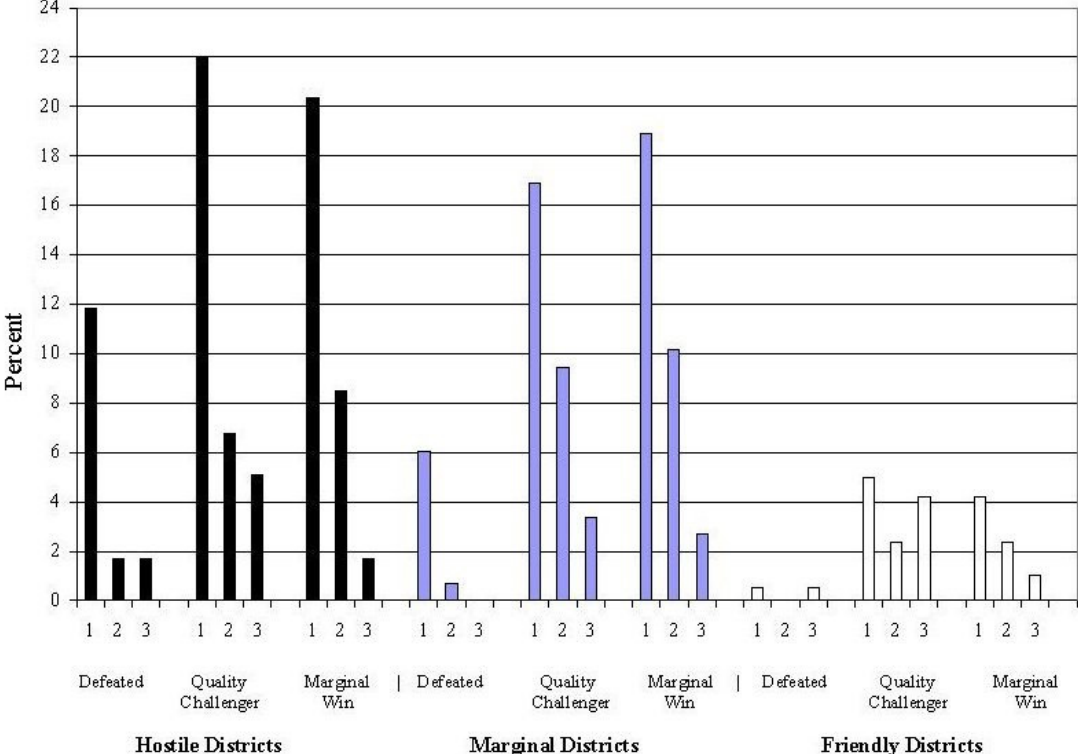


Figure 4.4

Comparison of Electoral Outcomes over Three Successive Re-election Bids for Three Types of District Environment, 1992-2000



The results suggest that, while they are not “easy pickings,” incumbents are far from invulnerable in successive reelection bids. The general trend in the “defeats” category is one of decline in each successive reelection bid. However, I would also note that in years such as 1974 and 1994 when there is a strong national partisan tide sweeping in new members (or, more accurately, sweeping out old members), the number of defeats *increases* over time suggesting that the district environment eventually “corrects” itself and sweeps out misfit members. Expanding on Tip O’Neill’s famous statement, then, it may be more accurate to say “All politics is local *in the long run.*”

The results for the seventies and eighties tell a similar story, but incumbents from hostile and marginal districts in the nineties exhibit a notably increased vulnerability in their first re-elections bids. The increased vulnerability of the nineties may be at least partly an artifact of the cases studied. The House Bank Scandal of 1992 resulted in an abnormally high number of defeats among incumbents, and the “Republican revolution” of 1994 also resulted in an unusually large degree of turnover. Also, as mentioned previously, as the number of hostile districts has declined, the remaining few have become more hostile than ever before.

Taken together, these results strongly suggest that members are *much* more vulnerable in hostile environments than in friendly ones. None of the electoral cohorts in friendly environments experienced more than one electoral defeat over three successive reelections bids for the 30 year period studied.

Conclusion

Environment appears to have a substantial impact on the effectiveness of members' reelection efforts. In particular, the environment seems to have important implications for the spending patterns of both incumbents and challengers. Incumbent behavior is relatively constant across environments, suggesting, as Fenno (1978) noted, that incumbents always fear a future challenge, while challenger behavior is more "short term" in scope and thus gives the appearance of being more rational.

Although the evidence presented here is preliminary, it does suggest that a greater focus on the ways in which political environment constrains the effectiveness of candidate behavior is needed. Particular attention should be paid to the gradual effect of environmental variables over time; political "misfits" may be able to stave off defeat once or twice, but it seems reasonable to expect that the environment will ultimately correct itself and select the candidate whose politics is best suited for the district.

Breaking down the analysis by decade suggests that the number of hostile districts is declining while the number of friendly districts is on the rise. No student of the congressional politics literature should be surprised by such a finding. What is more interesting is the widening gap between the electoral fortunes of incumbents who run in hostile districts compared with those who campaign in friendly environments. The decade-by-decade comparison of significant electoral variables strongly suggests that the political environment is more important than ever for the electoral prospects of incumbents. Although hostile districts are fewer in number today than in previous

decades, the data indicate that they are more dangerous for incumbents than ever. In this type of environment it seems unlikely that the impact of candidate behavior, including casework, can be sufficient to overcome the strong predisposition of the district.

In the next chapter, I will begin a more rigorous test of the hypothesis that political environment significantly constrains candidate behavior. Utilizing event history techniques, I intend to show that incumbent survival rates depend strongly on environmental variables, even controlling for the influence of constituent service. Event history analysis should provide leverage on the relationship between environmental and behavioral variables over time.

CHAPTER V

SURVIVING IN THE ELECTORAL JUNGLE

Introduction

The incumbency advantage is one of the most well established principles in the congressional elections literature. For a variety of well-documented reasons incumbents hold a tremendous advantage over challengers, and this advantage translates into extremely high rates of reelection (or “recidivism” depending on how cynical you are about our elected officials). In Chapter II, I examined the large body of existing literature suggesting that incumbents are able to actively enhance their electoral prospects through diligent constituent service. Like an intrepid explorer braving the dangers of an inhospitable jungle, members of Congress are alleged to possess the ability to tame even a hostile electoral environment and make it “safe” for reelection. In the preceding chapters, I have suggested that scholars may be giving too much credit to the efforts of incumbents while paying too little attention to the political environment in which these efforts take place. The results presented in Chapter IV confirm that the political environment matters in congressional elections. In this chapter, I present evidence that casts further doubt on the notion of incumbents as masters of their own destiny. I believe that if we model electoral competition as a function of both behavioral *and* environmental factors, we will find that incumbents are far less able to tame the electoral jungle than previously thought.

Analyzing Competition Over Time

In order to test the hypotheses outlined above, I utilize event history (duration) analysis techniques. Through the use of event history analysis, I hope to demonstrate the relative importance of environmental factors *controlling for candidate behavior*. Jones (2001) and Allison (1995) recommend the use of the Cox Proportional Hazards Model for this type of analysis. The Cox model is appropriate for multivariate duration analysis with time-varying covariates, and is preferable to parametric duration models “if the principle of interest is in assessing the impacts of covariates on the hazard rate” (Jones 2001, 16). Furthermore, estimates produced by the Cox model may be reported by STATA in an easily interpreted coefficient form, with each coefficient representing the relative impact of the variable, positive or negative, on the risk of electoral defeat.

For the present study, the dependent variable – electoral defeat – is coded as a dichotomous variable with one indicating a defeat and zero indicating reelection¹². The estimates for each of the independent variables are reported in a coefficient form, with a positive coefficient indicating an increased risk for electoral defeat and a negative sign indicating a decreased risk for defeat.

Determinants of Competition in Congressional Elections, 1980-1992

In an effort to better understand the dynamics of competition over time, I examine a host of environmental and behavioral variables for the period 1980 to 1992.

¹² Electoral and demographic data for this chapter were obtained from the *Almanac of American Politics* (Barone and Ujifusa 1972-2002) except where noted otherwise.

Environmental factors of interest include: previous vote for the incumbent (*i.e.*, the level of district support for the incumbent), the partisanship of the district, the presence of an experienced challenger, and the level of challenge in a primary election. Environmental variables represent the political context within which the general election occurs.

In addition to the commonly used behavioral variables “scandal” and “ideology,” I will also analyze three behavioral indicators constructed from survey data collected by Jon Bond (1980-1992). In his survey of congressional staffers, Bond gauges the level of district “attentiveness” for members of Congress with indicators such as the number of radio programs, TV programs, and newspaper articles the member has in the district, the number of trips home per year, and the number of newsletters, surveys and questionnaires sent to the district. To supplement these data, I have also collected data on staff allocations for each member of Congress during the same period (1980-1992). Specifically, I have coded the number of staff members assigned to the district, the number of staff members in Washington, D.C., and the number of staffers explicitly designated as “caseworkers”. These data allow me to construct useful composite measures of members’ district service activities in order to assess their importance in congressional elections. These measures are explained in detail below.

Recognizing that campaign spending is a special type of behavioral variable, and presents special difficulties to the researcher, I treat campaign expenditures as a unique type of variable and discuss my approach to this measure separately.

The purpose of the analysis that follows is to assess the impact of each variable on the risk of defeat in congressional elections. More broadly, I expect to find that environmental variables have the largest, most significant impact on the risk of electoral

defeat. Thus, the dependent variable in my analysis will be electoral defeat. The independent variables are described below in greater detail, along with my expectations for each.

Environmental Variables Influencing the Risk of Defeat

Previous Vote: The incumbent's vote percentage in the previous election is the most commonly used indicator of electoral safety or vulnerability. Incumbents whose vote percentage is high are generally regarded as safe while those whose vote share is low are regarded as vulnerable. I expect this variable to be negative and statistically significant, indicating that the higher the incumbent's share of the vote in the last election, the lower his or her risk of defeat in the present election.

District Partisanship: The partisanship of the district is a profoundly important factor in the outcome of congressional elections; if district voters are typically hostile to the incumbent's party then that incumbent should be vulnerable to defeat. In order to gauge district partisanship, I utilize a "normal vote" measure. The normal vote takes the average of the incumbent's party's presidential vote in the last two elections and subtracts the national average for those same two elections in order to roughly estimate the strength of district partisanship relative to the national average. Recognizing that strong third party challenges, as in 1968, 1980, 1992, and 1996, can affect this measure, I calculate the normal vote using the percentage of the two-party vote rather than the raw vote percentages. Using the normal vote measure of district partisanship, I expect that greater support for the incumbent's party will be associated with a negative risk of defeat.

Challenger Experience: The presence of an experienced challenger in a congressional race is usually a sign of incumbent vulnerability, and is an important catalyst for electoral

change. An experienced challenger can act as an essential informational conduit to the electorate, making voters aware of the possible shortcomings of the incumbent (Jacobson 1978, 2004). In order to assess the impact of an experienced challenger on the risk of defeat, I utilize Jacobson's dichotomous measure of previous political experience (zero means no previous experience; one indicates the challenger has held a previous office). The presence of an experienced challenger should be associated with greater risk for defeat in the general election; thus, the coefficient for experience should be negative.

Primary Challenge: A serious primary challenge, operationalized here as the percentage of the primary vote not won by the incumbent, can increase the vulnerability of the incumbent in a couple of ways. First, incumbents who face primary opposition may be forced to expend valuable resources and energy during the primary, leaving them more vulnerable in the general election. Also, a primary challenge may force the incumbent to adopt positions that are ideologically extreme compared to the general electorate; the need to satisfy the party base may place the incumbent in a vulnerable position for the general election. For these reasons the primary challenge variable should have a positive coefficient.

Behavioral Variables Influencing the Risk of Defeat

Scandal: The effects of a scandal on the incumbent should be obvious and profound. Scandal should increase the risk of defeat and produce a positive, significant coefficient. In order to capture the presence of scandal, I have coded a simple dummy variable to indicate whether or not the incumbent is embroiled in a scandal (following Welch and Hibbing 1997). Of all the behavioral variables, I believe this one to be the most significant, regardless of the political environment.

Ideological Extremism: The incumbent's ideology ought to have an effect on electoral outcomes. Generally speaking, I believe ideological extremism should be associated with a greater risk of defeat. The problem with using simple ideology measures, however, is that we cannot know whether or not the member is extreme *relative to the district*. While an "ideological discrepancy" measure¹³ such as the one used in Chapter IV may provide a rough gauge of the distance between member and district that is useful for simple crosstabular comparisons, the level of error present in the measure may make its use in a complex multivariate statistical model risky. For the present model, I will utilize an ideological extremism measure created by simply taking the absolute value of the incumbent's DW-Nominate score¹⁴ (Poole and Rosenthal 2000). While this measure does not provide us with information about the legislator's ideology relative to the district, I believe it is preferable to the discrepancy measure for this model and may, despite its drawbacks, provide us with some useful insights. Since the partisanship of the district is already estimated by the normal vote variable, the extremism measure should capture the effect of extreme ideology controlling for district partisanship. Generally speaking, I believe that a high ideology score should make an incumbent more vulnerable to attack from challengers. Thus, "extremism" should be positively associated with the risk of defeat.

District Communication: In order to gauge the degree of emphasis each representative places on communication with the district, I have constructed an index of communication

¹³ The "ideological discrepancy" measure used by Bond, Hanna and Campbell (1998) is the residual from an equation "regressing the incumbent's conservatism score on the presidential vote in the district in the two most recent presidential elections and several demographic characteristics" (11). The residuals from this equation indicate how far each member's conservatism score is from estimated district preferences. For a more detailed discussion of the use of residuals as an indirect measure, see Kugler (1983).

¹⁴ For a detailed explanation of Poole and Rosenthal's DW-Nominate scores, and to download their data, visit <http://voteview.uh.edu/page2a.htm>.

based on five indicators of district communication captured in the Bond survey: total number of newsletters, questionnaires, newspaper articles, radio shows, and television shows for the previous year. Rather than constructing a simple additive index, which might give undue weight to the few members who hold weekly TV or radio programs, I have converted the value for each variable to a z-score and then added the z-scores together to create my index. The values range from -2.69 to 39.40 (compared with a simple additive index, which produced a range of 0 to 212). I expect to find that frequent communication decreases the risk of defeat. Thus, the coefficient for communication should be negative and significant.

Caseworker Ratio: Based on data collected from the *Congressional Staff Directory* (1982-1994), I have taken the number of staff members designated as “caseworker” and divided that by the total number of staff members for each member of Congress in order to obtain a ratio of caseworkers to other staff. The ratio of caseworkers to other staff members should provide a rough indicator of the member’s general emphasis on casework. Assuming that decisions regarding the deployment of personnel are not arbitrary, the caseworker ratio should give us some indication of how important district service is to the member’s representational style. If the ratio is low, the representative may not place as much emphasis on casework as a member with a high caseworker ratio. If district service is the key to re-election, then a high caseworker ratio should be associated with a lower risk of defeat.

Presence in the District: The total number of days spent in the district during the previous year may suggest the importance of district concerns to the representative. One problem with this logic, however, is that members of Congress from Virginia and

Maryland usually live in their district, while those from Hawaii, Alaska and the west coast are less able to make frequent trips. Despite the potential “unfairness” of using this indicator to gauge district attentiveness, I believe it is generally correct to assume that representatives who spend more time in their district are more attuned to the needs, and general overall mood, of constituents.

A more fundamental problem with assessing the impact of presence in the district is that the variable is likely to be endogenous. Candidates who feel most vulnerable are likely to take more trips back to the district in a last-ditch effort to appeal to their constituents. Rather than being a factor that reduces the risk of defeat, then, presence in the district is more likely *influenced* by the risk of defeat.¹⁵ Given the nature of this variable, I expect presence in the district to be positively associated with risk of defeat.

Campaign Expenditures and the Risk of Defeat

Total Campaign Spending: Campaign spending represents a special category of variable in congressional elections studies. Campaign expenditures are among the most important variables influencing electoral success or failure, but their effects are also, unfortunately, the most difficult to analyze and interpret. Because incumbent spending and challenger spending are collinear, it is difficult (if not impossible) to disentangle the impact of one from the other. Rather than attempt to isolate the separate influences of challenger and incumbent spending, I have adopted the strategy of combining incumbent and challenger spending as a general indicator of perceived incumbent vulnerability. If total spending is low, I believe this to be evidence of the safety of the incumbent; if

¹⁵ Time series data on the travel patterns of members of Congress would be extremely useful in assessing the relationship between travel and electoral vulnerability. If travel data were available in monthly or weekly intervals, we could learn a great deal more about the relationship between these two variables. Alas, these data are not available at present.

spending is high, I take this as a sign of incumbent vulnerability. Challengers will not be able to raise enough money to mount an effective challenge unless the incumbent is regarded as vulnerable. Thus, campaign expenditures should be positively associated with the risk of defeat.

Results and Discussion

Table 5.1 reports the results, which largely support my expectations. Previous Vote, District Partisanship, District Communication, and Caseworker Ratio are all negative, indicating that they are associated with a lower risk of defeat. The latter two behavioral variables, however, were not statistically significant. Of particular interest is the “Percent Change” column, which indicates the percentage change in the risk of defeat for every one unit change in the corresponding variable. Inspection of these figures reveals that Previous Vote and District Partisanship are the most powerful variables reducing the risk of defeat, at roughly -3 % and -6 % respectively. Thus, the variable with the largest impact on reducing the risk of defeat in this model is environmental, not behavioral. On the other hand, none of the behavioral variables normally thought to help the incumbent achieves statistical significance.

Presence in the District produced a positive, statistically significant coefficient (albeit a very small one at only .3 %). The apparent irony that spending time in ones district puts one at greater risk for defeat is analogous to Jacobson’s (1978, 2004) finding that incumbents who spend the most money are most likely to lose. In both instances, the findings seem counterintuitive only if we make mistaken assumptions about the

Table 5.1
Risk Factors for Defeat in Congressional Elections, 1980-1992

Variables	Coefficient (Hazard Ratio)	Percent Change	Standard Error	z	p
Environmental:					
Previous Vote	-.0320 (.9684)	-3.1493	.0125	-2.56	.010
District Partisanship	-.0621 (.9398)	-6.0211	.0176	-3.53	.000
Experienced Challenger	.5792 (1.7846)	78.4610	.2385	2.43	.015
Primary Challenge	.0210 (1.0212)	2.1222	.0071	2.95	.003
Behavioral:					
Ideological Extremism	.1075 (1.1134)	11.3491	.7942	0.14	.892
Scandal	.5677 (1.7642)	76.4205	.2912	1.95	.051
District Communication	-.0003 (.9997)	-.0300	.0029	-0.09	.926
Presence in District	.0030 (1.0030)	.3005	.0014	2.12	.034
Caseworker Ratio	-.0961 (.9084)	-9.1627	1.1472	-0.08	.933
Spending:					
Total Campaign Spending	.0012 (1.0011)	.1201	.0002	6.13	.000
N					2024
Log-Likelihood					-373.36
X²					145.48
P					.0000
“Pseudo-R²”*					.1631

Note: Entries are Cox Proportional Hazard Model estimates. ‘Percent Change’ column indicates the impact of the covariate on the percent change in the hazard rate (*i.e.*, the percent change in the risk of defeat).

*The “pseudo R-squared” is intended as a rough indicator of the “goodness of fit” for the model, and is computed as $1 - L_1 / L_0$ where L_1 is the log-likelihood of the “full” model and L_0 is the log-likelihood of the “constant only” model. Greene (1997, 894), however, cautions us that “the maximum likelihood estimator is *not* chosen so as to maximize a fitting criterion based on prediction of y , as it is in the classical regression (which maximizes R^2).” Thus, the fit of the model in the traditional sense may be better than is suggested by the “pseudo R-squared” value reported here.

direction of causality. Rather than *causing* electoral trouble, frequent trips to the district are likely a *symptom* of pre-existing electoral trouble.¹⁶

Of the remaining non-behavioral factors, Challenger Experience has the largest effect. The presence of a politically experienced challenger results in a 78 percent greater risk of defeat. This result confirms the theory that an experienced challenger is a vital catalyst for electoral change. The impact of expenditures is also significant, but surprisingly small, perhaps due to the complexity of factors that influence spending. With a Percent Change value of only .12, we may conclude that an additional thousand dollars of spending results in an increased risk of defeat equal to one-tenth of one percent. The effect of Primary Elections is fairly small as well at only 2 %.

Ideological Extremism is positive, as expected, but it is not significant suggesting, as I feared, that it is not a very good measure. Re-running the model with an Ideological Discrepancy measure, however, provides an even more puzzling result; the coefficient is negative, suggesting that being out-of-step with the district actually decreases the risk of defeat (although, again, the causality may be the other way around – members who feel safe may feel more at liberty to diverge from district ideology). I suspect that neither measure is doing a very good job of tapping how well the incumbent represents district ideology.

¹⁶ A quick comparison between incumbents plagued by scandal and incumbents who are scandal-free reveals that incumbents who are embroiled in scandals spend an average of 15 more days in their districts than their more virtuous (or merely discreet) colleagues (150 to 135). When one considers how tight the schedules of most members of Congress are, one may reasonably conclude that fifteen days is a sizable difference between these subsets of representatives. Furthermore, similar discrepancies between these groups are evident in Communication (15 unit difference) and Incumbent Spending (\$149,000 difference), and suggest that incumbents who are involved in a scandal make greater efforts to reach out to their districts through direct mail, newspaper columns, radio and television appearances, and through greater campaign spending.

Conclusion

While scholars such as Fiorina (1977) and Cain, Fiorina and Ferejohn (1987) have long argued the importance of such behavioral factors as casework and general attentiveness to the district, the present analysis provides some initial evidence that candidate behavior is not nearly as important as environmental factors in determining the outcome of congressional elections (unless, of course, the candidate becomes involved in a scandal). Utilizing survey measures of district service and communication for the years 1980-1992, I find that neither district communication, nor emphasis on casework appear to be significant factors for electoral success or defeat when environmental factors are taken into account. Maintaining a frequent physical presence in the district, rather than decreasing one's chance of losing the next election, is actually related to an *increased* risk of defeat. Ideological extremism, as measured here (inadequately, no doubt), does not have a statistically significant impact on electoral outcomes.

Environmental factors appear to have a much more pronounced, and significant, relationship to competition in congressional elections. Strong support in the last election and strong partisan support in the electorate are associated with a lower risk of defeat in the next election, whereas the presence of an experienced challenger and the ordeal of a difficult primary are harbingers of tough electoral battle.

The effects of campaign spending on the risk of electoral defeat are surely important, but they are also complex and difficult to determine with confidence. The present study has failed to shed much light on the role of spending on competition for

congressional seats except to confirm that spending has a statistically significant effect on electoral outcomes. Clearly, more thought needs to be given to the twin problems of collinearity and endogeneity in order to disentangle the effects of incumbent and challenger spending from the risk of defeat.

Similarly, I am confident that there must be a better way to construct an ideology measure than the ones currently used in the extant literature. However, until scholars gain access to direct, district-level measures of constituent ideology, I fear it will be too difficult to develop a valid, reliable measure of incumbent ideology relative to the district. Studies of congressional elections would benefit greatly from improved measures of essential independent variables. Armed with better measures, scholars would gain a great deal more leverage on the important questions of the day.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Introduction

The argument laid out in the preceding chapters makes the case for the primacy of environmental factors in electoral politics. Behavioral variables must be properly viewed within the context of the district environment, since behavior is constrained by the district environment. The findings of this dissertation not only call into question some of the conclusions and points of emphasis in previous research, but the results also have practical implications for the American democratic system. For example, when reformers suggest ways of increasing electoral competition their proposals may be based on an incorrect understanding of the underlying problem, or they may, in fact, be suggesting remedies for problems that do not really exist. In this concluding chapter I will discuss the implications of these findings for future research, for representation and legislating in the Congress, and for electoral reform.

Implications for Elections Research

One of the fundamental assertions made in this dissertation is that electoral competition is best studied as a process that unfolds over time. There are compelling empirical reasons for this assertion (which I have outlined in previous chapters), but it is equally important to understand the theoretical implications of viewing competition as a

process. While it is true that our analyses of elections data are greatly improved by adopting a longitudinal design, a more fundamental reason to study competition as a process occurring over several elections is that democratic theory suggests such an approach.

There is nothing in the framework of our government or in the structure of our electoral system to suggest that the changing preferences of the electorate must produce immediate, or even rapid, change in government. The establishment of different methods of selection and terms of office for our public officials suggests that the founding fathers valued stability in government. The choice of representative democracy instead of direct democracy is itself an important testament to the values of the founding fathers. In the *Federalist #10* Madison explicitly argues that a representative democracy is preferable to a direct democracy because its slow, deliberate pace encourages informed and rational decision making. Madison's warnings against the "mischiefs of faction" represent a preference for political change that is more evolutionary than revolutionary.

From the field of biology, the theory of natural selection describes how life adapts to its environment in order to survive. I believe that future studies of electoral competition would do well to view elections through a similar theoretical framework. Over time, candidates who are not well suited to their political environment are replaced by those who are. The process of change is an ongoing one, and it is unlikely to be captured by a mere snapshot of a single moment in time.

In addition to the adoption of longitudinal methods of study, the elections literature would benefit from a greater focus on the effects of redistricting on competition. With Arizona making the move in 2000 to a nonpartisan, Iowa-style

redistricting process and states like Colorado and Ohio considering a Texas-style gerrymander, scholars should benefit from a growing set of new data. I believe that data gathered from these states will present scholars with opportunities that did not exist when the first studies of the “vanishing marginals” and the incumbency advantage were conducted. I suspect that future studies of the effects of redistricting will confirm the overwhelming primacy of the electoral environment for electoral competition.

Another potentially fruitful avenue for future research may be the effects of the mass media on electoral competition. The exponential growth of news media over the last twenty-five years has surely affected the electoral process in meaningful ways. Goidel and Shields (1994), for example, argue that growing media attention to elections has exacerbated the so-called “bandwagon effect” and may account for increasing margins of victory without diminishing prospects for electoral change. I believe their interesting findings deserve further investigation. It would be interesting to look at this phenomenon over a longer period of time to assess whether or not the evolution of “bandwagon effect” coincides with the “vanishing marginals.” Further research along this line might help us to more fully understand why increasing margins of victory do not seem to be related to actual turnover.

It might also be beneficial for us to widen the scope of our research to examine the linkages between media trends, electoral competition and political participation (particularly voting behavior). Large scale, longitudinal studies of electoral competition might be fruitfully joined with studies of aggregate public opinion such as Page and Shapiro’s *The Rational Public* (1992). Such an examination of the “big picture” of American politics would not only provide us with interesting empirical findings, but also

give us some new insights into major theoretical issues of representation and democratic responsiveness.

Implications for Representation and Legislating

In addition to the implications for future research stated above, the findings reported in this dissertation may have practical implications for our understanding of representation and legislating. Contemporary critiques of American campaign politics and its alleged negative effects on competition and turnout have tended to focus on the behavior of candidates. This is natural since campaigns are, as Wattenberg (1991, 1998) notes, “candidate centered” affairs. But the focus, both scholarly and otherwise, on candidate behavior may be misleading. Blaming the candidates for successfully winning re-election makes little sense and may have several negative side-effects for the larger democratic system.

First, the emphasis on candidate behavior may contribute to, or reinforce, popular misconception about electoral competition (or the lack thereof). By ignoring, or understating, the role that environmental factors play in the competitive calculus, scholars fuel and legitimize the popular perception that incumbents can “finesse the system” to win re-election for as long as they wish to remain in office. Such a behavioral bias leads to a cynicism among citizens, politicians, and scholars alike that tends to undermine public confidence in our democratic institutions (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1996, Parker 1996). By suggesting that voters are incapable of removing incumbents from office, researchers may be performing a dual disservice by underestimating voter rationality and

by overlooking the possibility that incumbents may simply be doing a good job of representation. By failing to properly identify the role that the district environment plays, scholars cast incumbents in the role of the “bad guy” and make it difficult for reform-minded officials to properly diagnose the nature of the problem (if any) with competition.

What are the consequences of such cynicism? First, voter turnout may be depressed by a sense of futility or lowered efficacy; if incumbents are viewed as invulnerable to defeat, then voters are less likely to believe that participation matters. As a result, voter turnout is extremely low. Another negative side-effect of public cynicism is described by Glen Parker (1996), who suggests that good potential candidates choose not to run for Congress because the institution is declining in prestige. As a result of this “negative selection” Congress is increasingly inhabited by less desirable, “rent-seeking” members who further diminish the public perception of the institution of Congress.

A third problem with the traditional focus on behavioral explanations of competition is that it may contribute to, or legitimize, media emphasis on strategy rather than substance in election coverage (Jamieson and Waldman 2003). By overemphasizing the power of pork barrel, casework, and spending in determining electoral outcomes, scholars may fuel the tendency of the media to focus on the purely electoral activities of incumbents rather than the substantive proposals of the candidates and their importance to the people in the district. Given the pure focus on strategy noted by Jamieson and Waldman (2003), the voter may be forgiven for viewing the contest more as a sporting event than a meaningful and consequential democratic process.

The voter is not the only electoral participant who suffers from the overemphasis on behavioral factors. Some incumbents may have a false sense of efficacy and a

misplaced confidence in the power of distributive politics and lavish campaign spending. The results of this dissertation suggest that proper attention must be paid to the political preferences of the district because district voters will ultimately cast out a political misfit in favor of a candidate who is a better ideological fit. This is not to suggest that spending and service do not matter, but rather to point out that there are conditions under which such behavior can be successful, and conditions under which the efforts of the candidate will ultimately fail over time. Some candidates may not be as safe as they think.

On the other hand, I believe that a proper focus on environment may also support the notion that the apparent lack of competition in many districts stems from the simple fact that voters prefer the incumbent to the challenger. When a district re-elects the same member of Congress in three or more successive re-election bids, we should not necessarily bemoan the result as evidence of declining competition. Perhaps, instead, there are many districts which have, through a form of natural selection, identified and chosen candidates that are well-suited as long-term district representatives. Thus, the re-election rate of incumbents may actually be an indicator that many members of Congress are doing their jobs well, rather than a harbinger of doom for electoral competition.

Good representation, then, is dependent on a proper understanding of the district environment. Members of Congress must understand the ideological temperament of the district and reflect that in their voting records or face the ultimate wrath of the district. As John Kingdon (1981) has noted, it is not a single vote or single decision that is likely to spell defeat for an incumbent, but rather a “string of votes” over the course of one or more terms that will be evaluated by the district. The district may be appropriately viewed as a self-correcting mechanism that will ultimately achieve a sort of ideological

equilibrium with its representative in Congress by choosing an individual who is appropriate for that district. I believe that such a view accords well with Madison's vision of representation put forward in *Federalist #10*, in which he warns against the quick, knee-jerk responsiveness of direct democracy in favor of a more dispassionate form of representation that we now think of as a "trustee" style.

In the legislative arena, a proper understanding of the relationship between candidate behavior and district environment may lead us to reconsider the explanatory power of distributive theories for modern lawmaking. Some scholars have already pointed out the limitations of distributive models of congressional organization, positing alternative theories of committee structure and activity. Krehbiel (1991), for example, stresses the role of informational exchanges between committee members and suggests that we should not ignore the desire of members to make good public policy. Rohde (1991) and Cox and McCubbins (1993) focus on the importance of parties and how parties use committees as agents for promoting the party agenda. The partisan model proposed by these scholars stresses collective goals rather than the individual focus of the distributive model. While none of these studies directly relate to the questions posed in this dissertation, I believe that the changing understanding of the legislative process evolving in the literature makes sense within the context of the findings presented here.

The practical consequences of ignoring the importance of the political environment on electoral outcomes are perhaps best illustrated by examining the popular proposals for electoral reform presented in Chapter I in light of the findings of this study. The first proposed reform seems to be the most promising because it fully appreciates the

importance of the district environment, while the other two proposals betray an underlying misunderstanding of the nature of electoral competition.

Electoral Reform Revisited

In Chapter I, I discussed the three most frequently suggested reforms for our electoral system: *Districting Reform*, *Campaign Finance Reform*, and *Term Limits*. Based on the findings reported in the previous chapters it is worth re-examining these proposals to evaluate their potential merits within the context of the empirical evidence. The primary mistake reformers have made is in overestimating the role incumbent behavior plays in electoral competition. I hope the evidence of the preceding chapters demonstrates the ways in which the effectiveness of incumbent behavior is constrained by the district environment.

Districting Reform may be the most direct and powerful way to increase competition in congressional elections. The comparison between Texas and Iowa presented in Chapter III strongly suggests that changes to the districting process can have a profound effect on the complexion of congressional races, influencing not just electoral margins, but other variables known to be related to competition as well. Furthermore, Chapters IV and V present empirical evidence supporting the notion that the political environment affects not only competition, but also candidate behavior in congressional elections. Experienced challengers run more often, and put forward a more vigorous challenge, in district environments that are viewed as either hostile or lukewarm to the incumbent. It is little wonder that incumbents take such an avid interest in the

redistricting process, and that parties' view redistricting as the key to their chances of controlling the Congress.

Campaign Finance Reform will probably never be a very successful reform for a variety of reasons. Campaign finance reform efforts such as McCain-Feingold rarely succeed for very long because new loopholes are quickly found to replace the old ones. Like the "war on drugs", campaign finance reform is doomed to always fail because it is an attempt to stem the supply of a product for which there is a great demand. A more fundamental problem with campaign finance efforts is the underlying assumption that challengers cannot raise enough money to defeat incumbents. Since financing of campaigns depends greatly on donor perceptions of the viability of a campaign, it should come as no great surprise that challenger spending is quite robust in districts where the incumbent is vulnerable. It is not the campaign contributions and spending that leads to competitiveness, but rather it is the competitiveness of the race that leads to the contributions and spending.

Term Limits represent an electoral reform in which the cure is worse than the disease. While it is true that open seat races are generally more competitive than races with an incumbent, and term limits do increase the number of open seat races, term limits actually subvert democracy by *depriving* voters of the candidate that may actually be the best choice for them. Rather than increasing choice for voters, term limits actually remove an important choice. Term limits are also insulting to the voters – the implicit assumption is that voters are too stupid to vote against incumbents. Term limits undermine the value of seniority and experience in Congress, which would not only limit democratic choice for voters, but could also diminish the quality of legislation. But

perhaps the most damning criticism of term limits is that they are simply not necessary if we reform the districting process to create competitive electoral environments.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that incumbents will continue to win re-election at a very high rate, regardless of what reforms we introduce into the electoral system. But the point of electoral reform is not to ensure that incumbents lose, but rather to increase the quality of representation by members of Congress by keeping elections honest, competitive, and meaningful. There is nothing in our political system to suggest that rapid turnover in our elected offices is necessary to achieve quality representation. Knee-jerk responsiveness to the rapidly changing tides of public opinion is not what the framers of the Constitution had in mind.

The findings presented in this dissertation support a view of electoral competition that allows for both stability and change, emphasizing the need for candidates to adapt themselves to their environment. By adopting a long-term view of electoral change, rather than a “one election at a time” analysis, I believe that we arrive at a more accurate, and encouraging, picture of representation than the one that dominates the conventional wisdom. A focus on electoral outcomes, rather than margins of victory, confirms Jacobson’s (1987) contention that vulnerability really hasn’t changed much over the last 30 years, and that a healthy level of electoral competition exists if we just look in the right places.

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RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

“The House Public Works Committee and the Distribution of Pork Barrel Projects.”
 Presented at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in Chicago, Illinois (with Emily Bonneau and Jon Bond).

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HONORS AND AWARDS

- Pinnacle Honor Society, 2002.
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