

# Competition in Congressional Elections: A Thing of the Past?

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## I. Introduction

Can congressional incumbents lose elections? Why have Congressional elections become less competitive? A discussion of this question gives some insight into the dynamics of a Congressional campaign.

## II. The Facts

Before the discussion of *why* Congressional elections are increasingly non-competitive, the lack of competitiveness should be established.

### 1. Elections in the House of Representatives: Career Politicians?

From 1946-2002, over 90% of House incumbents have sought re-election, and most win. Incumbents have an overwhelming advantage, as evidenced by the facts. For example, in 2002:

- \* No more than 10% of House races were competitive; 96% of incumbents were re-elected (in 1998 and 2000, 99% were returned to office);
- \* 81 (of 435) incumbents faced no challengers in the general election;
- \* Even in 1974, a bad year for Republicans, 77% of the Republicans seeking re-election were returned to office;
- \* From 1982 to 1996, 98.3% of incumbents have won in their primaries (and roughly 70% of faced no primary opposition at all).

### 2. Elections in the Senate: Slightly More Competitive

Over 85% seek of Senate incumbents re-election and enjoy an 80% chance of winning. From 1946-2002, of those Senators seeking re-election, 78.6% have won:

- \* Only 4.7% lost their primary elections;
- \* Only 16.5% lost in the general election;
- \* From 1982 to 1996, roughly 60% of Senators faced no primary opposition;
- \* Re-election rates vary more for Senators: In 1980, only 55% of incumbents won, but in 1982, 93% did so (in 1990, 97%).

### 3. Greater Margins of Victory

Not only are incumbents winning, but they are doing so by bigger margins. In the House, the average winning vote share (margin of victory) of incumbents increased from about 60% in 1946 to about 68% in 1988; it dipped below 65% in the next four elections, but rose again in 1998 to reach about 68% by 2002. (Most political scientists define a competitive election as one in which the winner receives less than 55% of the vote).

Looked at a different way, until 1966, an average of 61% of House incumbents won greater than 60% of the vote. This percentage jumped to 73% in the period from 1968 to 1982, and to 83% for 1984-88; from 1990-1998, it fell to 71%, but was nearly 88% in 2002.

In sum, several measures suggest that incumbency in the House was worth somewhere between 2.1-3.3% of the vote from 1946-1966 and jumped to between 7.0-8.6% from 1968-2000. In the Senate, from 1914 to 1960, incumbency was worth a bit more than 2% of the vote; it jumped to 7% from 1962 to 1992.

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### III. The Causes

We can point to several causes for the lack of competition in Congressional elections. This leads to a discussion of the various advantages incumbents have simply by virtue of being the current officeholder.

#### 1. "In-kind" Advantages

Congressional office comes with various "perks," some of which aid in the re-election efforts of members. These include the following:

*A. Congressional Staff:* Each member has a staff which also serves as the nucleus of a permanent campaign organization. The number of employees on the Hill has increased seven-fold since 1930. For example, in 1955, the House employed roughly 2,000 staffers; in 1990, 7,500 (corresponding numbers in the Senate are 1,000 in 1955, 4,000 in 1990).

Increasingly these staffers are used at home (in the district) for casework - more so if it looks to be a tight race. The percentage of total staff working in House districts nearly doubled from 1972 to 1992 (22 to 42%). Senate numbers almost tripled in same period (from 12 to 32%).

The press secretary is especially important in this regard, helping to generate favorable "news" about the Congressperson at the local level (more on this below).

*B. Direct Communications:* Members of Congress take full advantage of their "franking" privileges, which allows them to communicate by mail with members of their district about what is happening in Washington - all at government expense. Estimates suggest that from the mid-1960s to 1990, the volume of franked mail at least tripled, and perhaps quadrupled (and rises higher in election years). At minimum, this keeps the incumbent's name fresh in voter's minds, always an advantage when it is time to cast a vote.

*C. Bureaucratic Ombudsmanship:* Doing "casework," or helping individual citizens in the district with any variety of problems (e.g., visa problems, IRS disputes) is an extremely effective way to win the loyalty and vote of these citizens and others. Members of Congress understand this, and take this type of work very seriously.

#### 2. The "Scare-off Effect"

Aspirants for elective office usually act strategically, meaning that they know what the Congressional "incumbent advantage" is. This means that as a rule, only open seats will draw the type of candidate who has the experience, etc., that allow him or her to be competitive. This means that, generally speaking, only "amateurs," or those individuals who are lacking in some or all of the various characteristics, background, and/or experience that we associate with public officials, will challenge an entrenched incumbent.

It also means that even quality candidates find it hard to raise the resources necessary to be competitive. Congressional races cost a great deal of money, and incumbents have a far easier time raising money than do most challengers. This is especially true soliciting funds from Washington-based PACs (arguably another incumbent advantage), who are more likely to give to an incumbent.

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Even with all their advantages, incumbents typically raise money with gusto, especially since they can never be 100% certain of their re-election. The incumbent's "war chest" can be very preemptive, scaring off challengers.

- \* The average House race costs \$667 thousand, the average Senate race, \$3.6 million; all 37 challengers who defeated incumbents from 1996-2002 spent more than that;
- \* In 2002, the average returning House member had \$300 thousand left in their campaign coffers.

The differential between amounts of money challengers and incumbents have at their disposal for the campaign is growing. In the House, 1974 the amounts that challengers and incumbents had at their disposal were almost equal; in 1990, incumbents had a 4:1 advantage (in the Senate, the ratio was 2:1).

### 3. Districting

Congressional re-districting is always contentious (recall the controversy in the Texas legislature a few years back). Partisan gerrymandering, an inexact science, has evolved in the 1900s to a practice of incumbent-based, or "sweetheart" gerrymandering. This is a true bipartisan effort where district lines are drawn in order to insure that there is a high concentration of each party's supporters are in "their" respective districts - in other words, to protect the partisan status quo. In the end, this leads to a decline in the number of competitive elections, at least in the House, based simply on the fact that more districts are "packed" on a partisan basis.

### 4. Other Advantages

Incumbents have other advantages as well, which are discussed (in no particular order) below.

*A. Media:* Incumbents have certain advantages with various media which makes it easier to communicate with and cultivate a favorable view among supporters and potential supporters. These include Web sites (paid for by the government) and television studios (paid for by the party) which allow incumbents to "feed" local media, which is always looking for story material, especially on 90 or 120-minute evening newscasts.

*B. Legislative Committee Assignments:* Legislators have always understood that in order to claim they are representing their district they should seek out assignment on a committee that deals with policy concerns important to the district. For example, if the legislator is from Washington, they might seek assignment on Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee; if from the Midwest, on Agriculture. Since the details of most policy is worked out in committee, this allows the legislator to go back to the district and claim to be doing something for the district.

*C. Recent Trends in Voting Behavior:* There are a few voting trends in voting in Congressional elections in the past few decades that advantage incumbents. First, turnout is decreasing - not only in Congressional elections, but in all elections.

Second, "ticket splitting," or casting one's vote for the presidential candidate of one party while voting for the Congressional candidate of the other party, was consistently rising throughout the middle part of the past century. This trend seems to have reversed itself. In 1972, 192 districts split their vote in this

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way; in 2000, only 86 did so. In short, voters, who are packed into increasingly partisan leaning districts, are voting to support their party.

### IV. Can They Lose?

The previous might suggest that incumbents are invulnerable; this is not the case, although clearly a challenger faces an uphill battle. There are a few factors which may contribute to an incumbent defeat.

#### 1. The "Scare-off Effect" Does Not Always Work

Incumbents sometimes show signs of weakness or are weakened by circumstance. Unfavorable redistricting, a small war chest, press criticism, unfavorable national tides, and scandal can all make an incumbent seem vulnerable, attracting quality challengers to the fray.

#### 2. Presidential Politics

The most obvious national political factor concerns presidential politics. Sometimes the "coattail" effects of a popular presidential candidate raises the popularity (and thus the chances for victory) of Congressional candidates in his party (e.g., Reagan in 1980). It is also the case that historically, the president's party usually loses seats in the mid-term elections.

#### 3. National Tides

Congressional elections are primarily local affairs, more so in the House than in the Senate. However, sometimes Congressional elections are influenced by national political factors, favoring one party over the other. This was the case, for example, in:

- \* 1974: Anti-Watergate sentiment (Democrats gain);
- \* 1980: Anti-Carter sentiment and a national recession (Republicans gain);
- \* 1992: Anti-Congress sentiment from various scandals (banking, Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill; 110 newcomers are elected);
- \* 1994: Anti-Congress and anti-Clinton (health care, economy) sentiment (Republicans gain);
- \* 1998: Anti-impeachment sentiment (backfired - Democrats gain mid-term seats);
- \* 2002: National security concerns (Republicans gain mid-term seats).

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### Appendix: Terms

Electoral System: The rules by which popular votes are translate into seats in government. Aspects of electoral systems typically include (1) whether citizens vote for parties or candidates; (2) how many candidates are elected from each electoral district; (3) the size of the electoral district; (4) and the number of votes needed to win. At the national level, we use the single-member district, winner-take-all (A.K.A., "first past the post," or "plurality winner") system.

Franking Privilege: The right of public officials (members of Congress) to send letters free of charge. The precedent for the privilege dates back to 1660 in the British House of Commons, and was first granted in January 1776 in the colonies to soldiers in Revolutionary War. The right was gradually extended till it included nearly all officials and members of the public service.

Gerrymandering: The drawing of district lines to maximize the electoral advantage of a political group,

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party or faction. The term was first used in 1812, when Elbridge Gerry was Governor of Massachusetts, to characterize the State redistricting plan.

Incumbent: Person holding an elected office. Usually refers to an elected official running for re-election.

Open Seat: An election in which there is no incumbent running.

PAC: A political action committee, a legal entity formed by a group (corporation, union, interest, citizen action group, etc.) to raise money and make contributions to the campaigns of candidates for federal office.

Redistricting: In the United States, the geographical division of a state into congressional, state representative, senatorial, or other legislative districts on the basis of the distribution of population. Congressional district boundaries are redrawn every 10 years following the census in order to ensure that an appropriate number of districts contain approximately equal population.

War Chest: The amount of money left over from a congressperson's campaign, which is then used as seed money for the next campaign.

### For Further Reading

Herrnson, Paul S. 2003. *Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (CQ Press).

Jacobson, Gary C. 2004. *The Politics of Congressional Elections*. 6<sup>th</sup> Edition (Longman).

Mayhew, David R. 1974. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. (Yale University Press).