# New Directions in Congressional Politics

Edited by
Jamie L. Carson

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Chapter 3

# Congressional Elections

## Electoral Structure and Political Representation

*Erik Engstrom*

Congressional elections are inherently important. They determine who holds power in Congress and, as a consequence, determine who holds power in the entire government. For this reason alone they would be worth studying. But congressional elections also present a godsend for researchers interested in the study of campaigns and elections. By providing 435 House races every two years with varying political and economic conditions—constituencies, partisan bases, media markets, demographics, economic interests, etc.—congressional elections provide researchers with a series of "mini-laboratories" to study voters, candidates, and campaigns. The presidency, by contrast, offers only one electoral contest every four years, and a unique one at that. Thus it is unsurprising that congressional elections have attracted substantial scholarly attention. And, as a result, students of congressional elections have produced a rich, and well-respected, body of knowledge. The purpose of this chapter is to survey recent developments in the study of congressional elections and to suggest potential new frontiers of exploration.

No single essay, however, can cover the vast literature on the topic.[1] To narrow the focus to a manageable level, the chapter examines the impact of the U.S. electoral structure on the contemporary Congress. The first section of the essay examines how changes in electoral rules over time have shaped the behavior and outcomes of congressional elections. The second section examines how the electoral structure shapes voter behavior. The third section turns to the relationships between legislators and constituents. The final section discusses potential new directions in the study of congressional elections. In particular, I discuss how the rise of party polarization has produced a series of new and important questions regarding the conduct of congressional elections.

### The Institutional Foundations of Congressional Elections

One simple, yet powerful, way to classify the world's legislatures is to place them along a spectrum. At one end are strong-party systems. At the other end are candidate-centered systems. In a strong-party system, voters select

candidates based on their party label and the individual attributes of candidates tend to matter less. A Westminster parliamentary system, like Great Britain's, serves as a paradigmatic example (Cox 1987). Voters cast votes based on their feelings towards the political parties, and much less on the personal characteristics of the particular candidates running in their constituency. At the other end are candidate-centered systems. In these systems voters care more about the personal characteristics and the issue positions of candidates. Here we might place modern United States congressional elections. This is not to say that party labels are unimportant in candidate-centered elections, or that the personal characteristics of candidates are unimportant in party-centered elections, but that the relative emphasis placed on candidates and party labels differ across the two regime types.

Political scientists have found that, to a great extent, formal institutions undergird these differences. Formal institutions are the rules of the game. Like any game, rules constrain behaviors, by raising the costs of certain actions and providing incentives for other actions. In the context of congressional elections, scholars have emphasized electoral rules as they apply to nominations, the campaign for votes, and how those votes translate into legislative seats. Changes in any one of the various aspects of the game can lead to changes in how elections are conducted. To take one example, letting voters choose party nominees instead of party elites will alter how candidates campaign and how they will behave in the legislature. Thus electoral rules provide incentives for certain types of actions, which in turn shape the behavior of candidates, activists, and voters.

Yet because the rules governing U.S. congressional elections have remained largely constant over the past thirty years, it can be easy to miss their particular, and pervasive, effects. One way scholars have discerned the effects of electoral rules is to compare modern congressional elections to those of the past.[2] In the rest of this section, I examine some of the major historical developments in the conduct of congressional elections. How candidates are nominated, how ballots are cast, and how votes are translated into congressional seats have each changed dramatically throughout American history. Looking backward across time will throw modern elections into sharp relief.

## Nominations

The first step in winning a congressional seat is to gain the nomination of one of the major political parties. Nowadays we take it for granted that voters get to choose their party's nominee in primary elections. But choosing nominees in direct primaries was not the norm throughout the nineteenth century. Instead, congressional nominees were typically chosen in closed party nominating conventions. These conventions were comprised of local party elites who met every two years to select congressional nominees (along with other local offices and delegates to state and national conventions). These conventions were often

run by party bosses, particularly in cities, who held enormous sway over the nomination process (e.g., Yearley 1970; Reynolds 2006).

The image of candidates being selected in smoke-filled backrooms might be exaggerated, but it contains more than a kernel of truth. Nominations were very much an "insider's" game. Party, or factional, loyalty was critical. Running as a maverick who bucked the local party organization was a risky way to build a political career. Rather, the system rewarded loyalty. The nomination system meant that candidates were dependent on local party managers, or party bosses, for their nomination. Even if an incumbent wanted to continue serving in Congress there was no guarantee that he would be re-nominated. Abraham Lincoln, for instance, was one of the casualties of the practice known as "rotation"—where different factions of a party would take turns holding a congressional seat. Elected to the House of Representatives in 1846 as member of the Whig Party, Lincoln served a single term in the U.S. House of Representatives. Although he expressed interest in running for reelection, the Whig organization back in his district chose someone else to be the Whig nominee.[3]

Reforms at the state level during the early twentieth century replaced the convention nomination system with direct primaries. Still used to this day in almost every state, direct primaries handed the choice of nominees directly to voters. By forcing candidates to make appeals to voters for nomination, the direct primary accelerated the tilt towards a candidate-centered system (Ware 2002). Candidates have to win votes directly from citizens. Primaries have gradually tilted the competitive advantage to politicians who could develop a personal reputation with voters and away from those whose skills lay in navigating the "back-room" politics of party conventions (Reynolds 2006; Adams and Merrill 2008). A candidate who wants to buck the party organization can still be re-nominated, as long as they win votes in a primary.

Although primaries reduced the influence of party machines, another, perhaps unintended, consequence was to reduce competition for party nominations. Since the initial adoption of direct primaries there has been a steady historical decline in competition within primaries. Incumbents face few serious challengers in primaries and often run uncontested. In a comprehensive study of competition in primaries, Ansolabehere et al. (2006: 78) found that the number of competitive House primaries—where the winner receives 60 percent or less of the vote—was 29 percent between 1910 and 1938. From 1960 to 2000, the number of competitive primaries plummeted to 11 percent. Thus, most incumbents face little serious competition in their primaries, and even fewer lose in primaries.

## Balloting

A second major feature of the electoral system concerns the physical conduct of casting a ballot. Although we may think of the mechanics of casting ballots as a rather mundane aspect of elections, it turns out that the order in which

candidate names are arranged on a ballot and how ballots are physically cast can have a huge influence on electoral outcomes. One need only look to the 2000 presidential election to see the potential impact of ballot layouts (e.g., Wand et al. 2001). Today when we vote, we go to a polling station where we receive a ballot containing candidates for every office. These ballots have been compiled and printed out by the state or local government. We then fill out our ballot in secret. Voters are free, if they so choose, to vote for a Democratic nominee for president and a Republican for the House (or vice versa). The ballot is then given to a non-partisan poll worker (or as is becoming more common, mailed in or recorded on a computer).

Contrast that with voting in the nineteenth century. For most of the nineteenth century, elections were conducted using what is known as the "party strip" ballot. This type of ballot had two distinguishing features. First, the ballot featured the party's nominee for the most important office—such as president or governor—at the top of the ticket and candidates for subordinate offices were listed below it. It did not list candidates for other parties. So, for example, the Democratic ballot would contain only Democratic candidates from president to governor to House candidate and so on. Second, ballots were printed and handed out by the parties (today they are printed by the government). Voters would receive these ballots either in their newspapers or they would get them from party "hawkers" standing outside the polling stations. This turned many polling stations into rough-and-tumble arenas as competing party hawkers tried to force their ballots on prospective voters (Bensel 2004; Summers 2004).

During presidential election years the party's nominees for president and vice-president, and frequently their images, headed the ticket, usually followed by the names of the electors, and then candidates to lower offices in descending order. Thus, candidates for Congress would find their names listed below candidates for more prominent offices (i.e., president, governor). Because the ballot only contained candidates of a single party, voters were faced with a simple choice: vote for all of the Democratic candidates or all of the Republican candidates. The physical format radically curbed split-ticket voting; voting for a Republican nominee for president and a Democrat for Congress was not easy. Although there were some workarounds—such as writing in an alternative name over the name of a listed candidate—these practices were cumbersome. Moreover, voting was public. Voters cast their tickets in full view of anyone who wanted to watch. All of these features reinforced straight-ticket voting (Rusk 1970; Engstrom and Kernell 2005).

Thus, the fates of same-party candidates were thoroughly intertwined. Congressional candidates were dependent on the efforts of local parties to work together to pull them into office (Carson, Engstrom, and Roberts 2007). Congressional candidates were also subject to the popularity of the candidate that headed the ticket. A congressional candidate saddled with an unpopular presidential nominee at the top of the ticket could find the campaign rough-going.

This system fundamentally changed starting in the late 1880s when Massachusetts first adopted what was known as the Australian, or secret, ballot.[4] The reform efforts were pushed by good-government reformers, sometimes in conjunction with politicians, who were fed up with the perceived (and real) corruption of party machines (Ware 2000; Reynolds 2006). The reform quickly spread across the country and by 1920 almost every state had adopted some version of the new ballot format. The new ballot had a number of distinctive features. First, it was printed by the government rather than by the parties. Second, it placed candidates of *all* the parties onto a single, consolidated ballot. Finally, it included provisions for secrecy at the ballot box.

These changes to the electoral system wrought by the Progressive Era helped sweep away the strong party machines and set down the building blocks for the emergence of a candidate-centered system. Candidates began to control their own fates to a much greater degree than they did in the past. They were no longer bound to the fates of the other candidates on the ticket—in particular the presidential nominee at the head of the ticket. They also could no longer rely on the local party organization to pull them to victory by rallying the faithful on Election Day.

Perhaps most important, from the perspective of congressional elections, the individual attributes and campaign talents of candidates began to take on central importance. For instance, Carson and Roberts (n.d.) have shown that the importance of candidates having prior office-holding experience, in terms of electoral success, increased following the passage of the Australian ballot. Candidate quality further spiked-up during the 1960s (Cox and Katz 1996). This is not to imply that partisanship does not matter in terms of voting decisions. It still operates as an informational cue for voters (discussed more below). But it is not the same thing as strong party machines bringing voters to the polls.

In short, changes in the electoral structure over the last 120 years have turned modern congressional elections increasingly into a candidate-centered system. Getting to Capitol Hill takes entrepreneurial self-starters. The next section considers how these changes have influenced the responsiveness and competitiveness of congressional elections.

## Competition and Responsiveness in Congressional Elections

The most powerful tool that voters have, in the aggregate, to influence Congress is changes in the number of seats each party holds. One need only look to the most recent elections to see the dramatic influence congressional elections can have. The 2006 election marked the Democrats' return to the majority for the first time since 1994. Democrats captured control of both the House and Senate by riding a wave of public discontent with both the Iraq War and the Bush administration's handling of Hurricane Katrina. Democrats padded their congressional majorities in the 2008 elections, and, for a brief period, even held

a sixty-seat filibuster-proof majority in the Senate. In 2010, Republicans retook the House gaining sixty-four seats from the Democrats.

Though dramatic, the seat swings in recent elections pale in comparison to some of those found in earlier periods of American history. For example, in 1854 the Democrats lost a monumental seventy-four seats. The House only had 234 members total, so the seat swing accounted for nearly 30 percent of the membership. Similar swings routinely happened throughout the nineteenth century. In 1874 the Republicans were on the losing end of another massive wipeout—surrendering ninety-four seats. In 1894, the Democrats lost 125 seats (in a chamber of 357). What is fascinating—and telling—about these elections is that the national vote division did not change all that much (Brady 1991). Small vote swings produced outsized seat swings. Political scientists have devised a measure to more precisely capture this connection between vote and seat changes. The measure—known as the swing ratio—calculates the percentage change in legislative seats given a percentage change in the national vote. Higher values of the swing ratio indicate an electoral system where small changes in the vote lead to large changes in seat shares. Lower values indicate a system where large changes in the vote lead to only small changes in seat shares.

Figure 3.1 displays the value of the swing ratio from 1850 through 2008. The figure shows steady erosion in the swing ratio over time. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, the swing ratio was over five. In other words, for every one-point change in the national vote, legislative seats changed by

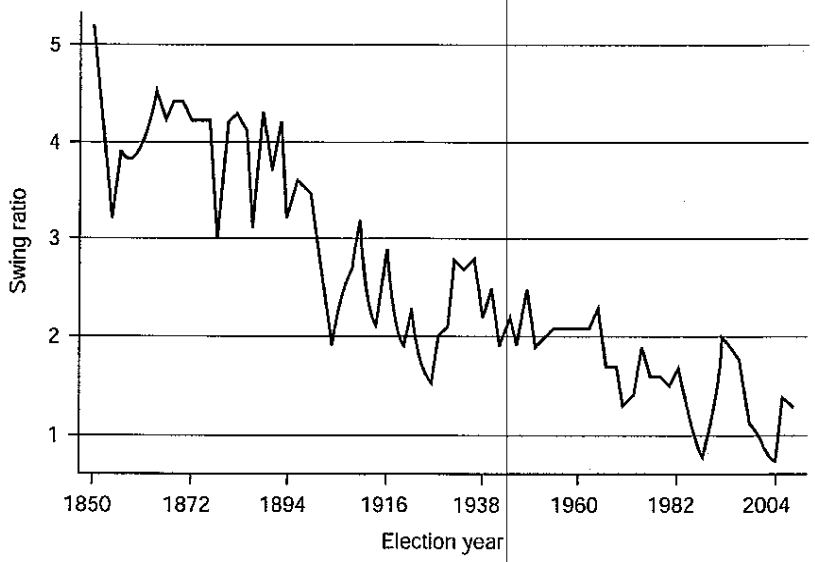


*Figure 3.1* Swing ratio, United States House races (1850–2008)

5 percent. Compare that to more recent elections. In 2006 the swing ratio was a more modest value of two. Even though that election swept the Democrats into power, the actual swing in seats was modest by historical standards. In short, seat swings in congressional membership have become increasingly less responsive to changes in the vote.

This is not meant to suggest that public opinion does not matter. Macro movements in public opinion certainly influence congressional decision-making (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). But by looking back across time, we can see that in the modern era it takes a bigger swing in the national vote to alter the seat distribution in the U.S. House. This matters because the seat distribution in Congress shapes the ideological alignment of government. The responsiveness of seat swings to vote swings also matters because it influences how members behave and who they represent. If elections are local affairs, then members of Congress will pay more attention to their local constituency and worry less about their national party label. But if elections are influenced primarily by what the party does on Capitol Hill, then members will gear their actions towards promoting their party label at the expense of local concerns.

Closely tracking the decline in the swing ratio has been a general decline in competitive districts. This is not surprising; the two factors are intimately related. The more districts that are competitive the more districts that will shift with changes in the national vote (Mayhew 1974b). For instance, a district that is split 52–48 in favor of the Democrats will more likely flip if there is a small shift in the vote to the opposition party. But a district split 70–30 in favor of the Democrats will be much less likely to flip even if there is a major national vote swing to the opposition party. In other words, the more districts that are evenly divided, the more districts that have the potential to change party hands. Thus, as individual districts become less competitive, the responsiveness of congressional membership to changes in the national vote diminishes.

To get a sense of over-time trends in competition, Figure 3.2 plots the number of districts where the victor won by 55 percent or less of the major party vote. The 55 percent threshold is a traditional metric of classifying districts as either competitive or non-competitive (Jacobson 2009; Mayhew 1974b). As with the swing ratio, there has been a steady decline in competitive congressional elections over the last one hundred years. In the late nineteenth century nearly 40 percent of House elections met the competitive threshold. A steep drop-off occurred near the turn of the last century. This was then followed by another drop in the 1960s. The number of competitive races has remained low ever since.

One consequence of low competition is that membership in Congress is relatively stable from one year to the next. Where Congress was once a layover in a longer political career, it is now a destination. For many modern politicians, serving in Congress represents the culmination of a political career. Again, the comparison with the nineteenth century is illuminating. For much of the nineteenth century, serving in Congress was often one stop in an otherwise

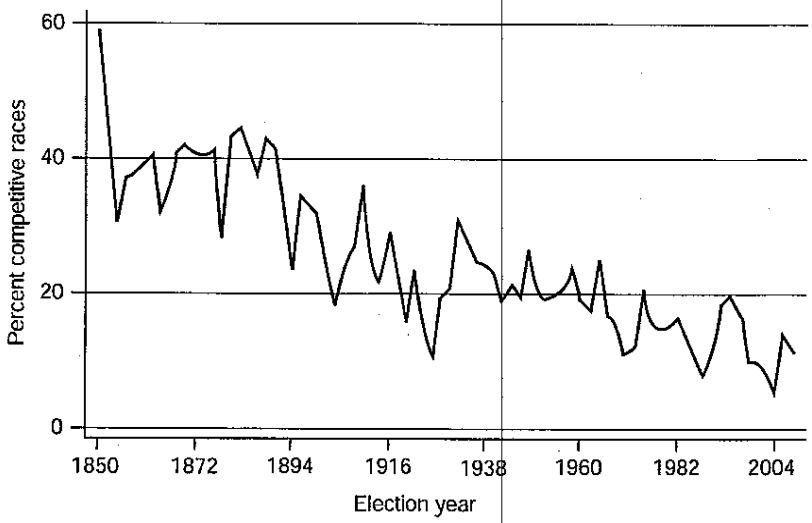


*Figure 3.2* Competitive United States House races (1850–2008). Winner wins with 55 percent of major-party vote or less.

peripatetic career (Brady, Buckley, and Rivers 1999; Kernell 1977a; Polsby 1968). A typical nineteenth-century political career might involve winning a local office, serving in the state legislature, serving a term or two in Congress, and then returning to the state legislature. Nowadays, for many, serving in Congress is a destination office. John Dingell (D-MI) was first elected to the House in 1955 and continues to serve (fifty-five years and counting—he has been reelected twenty-six times). Robert Byrd (D-WV) served in the Senate for a record fifty-one years, by far the longest career to date in the upper chamber.

The search for the cause of declining swing ratios, uncompetitive elections, and decreased turnover has preoccupied students of congressional elections for the past thirty years. Indeed, one can frame the vast modern literature on congressional elections as the search for the reasons contributing to the decline in competition in elections over time. Scholars have looked in a number of places. One suspect that has occurred to many pundits and scholars is redistricting. The suspicion is that incumbents of both parties colluded to draw lines that protect themselves (Tufte 1973). The overall trend, however, among researchers is that redistricting only has a minimal impact on declining competition. Indeed, the general thrust of the literature suggests that while redistricting might depress competition in the short term, it can only account for a small proportion of the overall decline in competition (Friedman and Holden 2009).

Other scholars have argued that voters may be the root cause of "red" and "blue" districts. For example, in an intriguing essay Bruce Oppenheimer (2005) suggested that the residential patterns of voters might be leading to the decline

in electoral competition. As the country has become more mobile, citizens have been seeking out places to live that better mesh with their lifestyle. For example, young artisans tend to congregate in urban centers while upper middle class families tend to select upscale suburbs. It so happens that many of these lifestyle choices correlate with partisanship. The result of this lifestyle sorting has also been a political sorting of America into "deep red and blue" districts. Here, according to Oppenheimer, lies the basis of uncompetitive elections. Full empirical documentation of these trends is still lacking, but it is a highly provocative notion.

Finally, many scholars have pointed to the candidates themselves. The single greatest contributor to the decline, according to many researchers, has been the importance of incumbency. To rephrase James Carville's famous mantra from the 1992 presidential election: "It's the candidates, stupid." While issues, party labels, and money all influence elections, the driving determinant of electoral outcomes, according to many scholars, are the particular candidates that run in each district. If you want to predict which candidate will win in a congressional election, you only need to answer one simple question: is an incumbent running for reelection? If so, bet on the incumbent. It is not a foolproof bet, but it is close. When incumbents face political novices, the incumbent almost always wins.

For many scholars, changes in the U.S. electoral structure over the last century have encouraged and accentuated the electoral advantages of incumbency. The story goes something like the following. The demise of strong, local political parties means that representatives had to run on their own (Carson, Engstrom, and Roberts 2007). They could no longer rely on party machines to carry them to victory. As a result members of Congress gradually adapted, developing the skills it takes to win election on their own. As they evolved and adapted they became much better at scaring off challengers, raising financial war chests, performing tasks for their constituents, bringing home pork-barrel projects, etc. The result has been the rise of incumbent victory margins and the decline of competitive congressional elections.

Thus, despite much research into the subject, no definitive answer to the cause of uncompetitive House elections exists. Most likely all of the factors discussed above play a role. But here again there is still much to learn. How much weight to put on each of these factors remains an important research task. In addition, another area of potential future research would be to consider in more depth the consequences, if any, of uncompetitive elections. The natural inclination for researchers and the public is to favor more competitive elections. The belief is that uncompetitive elections are somehow a failure of democracy. But it is not entirely obvious that more competition promotes better representation. Indeed, some scholars have recently argued that more competitive districts would in fact make citizens unhappy (Brunell 2008).

For example, Buchler (2005) has argued that thinking of elections as akin to an economic market—where competition is prized—might be the wrong

metaphor to apply to elections. Instead, if one thinks about representation as the relationship between an employer and employee (where representatives are the employees) then less competitive districts might ensure better representation. It is easier for the representative (employee) to know what the district (employer) wants if that district is sending a clear signal. Districts that are deep red or deep blue send very clear signals to representatives. Competitive elections, on the other hand, send mixed signals about what the district median wants, making it harder for representatives to cater to the median voter. This is an intriguing perspective, the implications of which might lead to new insights into topics such as redistricting, campaign finance, and negative campaigning.

## Presidents and Midterms

Another major structural feature of congressional elections is the Constitutional staggering of elections. In particular, the division of congressional elections into "presidential" and "midterm" elections creates one of the fundamental dynamics of congressional elections. The division between presidential and midterm years affects who shows up to vote and how they vote. In presidential election years the party winning the presidency usually gains seats in Congress. For instance, in 2008, Democrats captured the White House while at the same time picking up twenty-two House seats. Since 1940 the party winning the presidency has gained seats in the House in thirteen out of the eighteen elections. This correlation between presidential and congressional success suggests the possibility of a presidential coattail effect, where triumphant presidential candidates pull fellow congressional candidates into office. In the nineteenth century the party ticket ballot induced long coattails. In those states that held congressional elections in November, the fates of congressional candidates were physically linked with the presidential candidate at the top of the ticket. In the modern era, with ballots that allow split-ticket voting, the mechanism underlying "coattail" voting remains unclear. Thus, although there does appear to be a "presidential pulse" to congressional elections (Campbell 1997) the mechanism underlying this relationship is not clearly understood.

On the flip-side are midterm elections. One of the regularities of U.S. politics is that the president's party will lose seats in a midterm election. Only four times since 1826 has the president's party gained seats in midterm elections. A number of different explanations have been offered for this pattern. One of the earliest explanations for this phenomenon was "surge and decline" (Campbell 1960). Popular presidential candidates motivate marginal voters to turn out and vote. And they support congressional candidates of the victorious presidential candidate—the surge. Two years later the absence of a galvanizing presidential race leaves these marginal voters sitting at home. As a result the congressional candidates of the president's party suffer—the decline. The idea of surge and decline fell out of scholarly favor for a number of years but has recently been partially rehabilitated by James Campbell (1997).

Other scholars have argued that voters use the midterm election as a referendum on the performance of the president and his party. Kernell (1977b), for example, argued that voters who are upset or dissatisfied with the president's performance are more likely to turn out to vote. Thus, the preponderance of "negative voters" at the midterm causes the president's party to lose seats. Another variant of the referendum argument is that voters behave strategically. In particular, they use their votes to ideologically balance the government. Voters, in the aggregate, tend to be moderate. Thus if government becomes too liberal (or too conservative) voters can pull the ideological balance of government back towards the center by voting for candidates opposite of the president's party (Fiorina 1992).

Finally, Erikson (1988) has argued that voters simply penalize the party of the president no matter his performance. Whether the economy is up or down, whether there is peace or not, the president's party suffers at the polls. The presidential penalty argument can be supplemented by considering the argument put forth by Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman (1986). They found that the size of the presidential penalty depends on how many congressional seats the president's party holds going into a midterm election. The more seats the president's party holds the more they lose. Here, then, could be one reason why the Democrats lost so many seats—sixty-four—in the 2010 election. By gaining a number of House seats in the 2008 election, Democrats entered the 2010 elections "overexposed." They had 255 seats to defend which was well above their historical average. By this logic, Democratic losses in 2010 were large primarily because there was a Democrat in the White House *and* they had a historically large number of seats to defend.

Again, research in this area has pushed forward our understanding of congressional elections. But a number of important and tantalizing research questions remain. What exactly is the psychological basis, if any, of coattail voting? Or is coattail voting an artifact of other factors that simultaneously drive both presidential and congressional voting, such as the state of the economy (Fair 2009)? Why does a presidential penalty exist? Why do some voters punish their House members for what the president has, or has not, done? Who are the voters who engage in "penalizing" behavior? At the heart of these questions lie questions about what motivates voters in congressional elections.

## Congressional Voters

Most of what scholars know about voter behavior comes from research into U.S. presidential elections. Relatively less is known about voting in congressional elections. This imbalance reflects the comparative paucity of reliable survey data at the level of congressional districts. The difficulty of creating large enough statistical samples in each of 435 districts has long served as a barrier for the study of congressional voters. This lacuna, however, is currently being filled by the magnificent new Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). By

surveying over 30,000 people, the CCES provides for sufficient sample sizes to make inferences about what is happening within and across individual congressional districts. This will allow scholars to probe district-level opinion in a way that has not been possible previously. The first CCES study was conducted in 2006 and scholars have already begun to produce new insights into congressional elections (e.g., Ansolabehere and Jones 2010; Stone and Simas 2010).

This is not to say, however, that we know nothing about congressional voters. Indeed, scholars have uncovered a number of common facts about congressional voters. In particular, the overriding theme of the study of congressional voters is that voters tend to know few of the policy details about the candidates running in their district. And in many cases, voters are unable to recall the names of the candidates running (Miller and Stokes 1963; Mann and Wolfinger 1980). At first glance, this information deficit might seem troublesome. However, a compelling logic resides behind this "ignorance." The logic was most forcefully laid out by Anthony Downs in his influential book, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957). Whether an individual votes or not has almost no impact on the outcome of an election. In other words, in a large-scale election your vote will have no impact on whether your preferred candidate wins or loses. Thus the instrumental benefits to casting a "well-informed" vote are essentially zero, according to Downs' logic. Yet the cost of becoming informed about the details of candidates running in a House election is not trivial. One has to pay attention to the election, the campaign promises and, in the case of the incumbent, their past record. These are all "costs" (time and effort that could be spent on something else). Thus for most people, according to this logic, the costs of gathering encyclopedic knowledge of politics outweigh the benefits.

Instead, voters rely on simple mental shortcuts. In the context of congressional elections the two primary mental shortcuts voters use are party labels and incumbency. Indeed, research into congressional voters finds that partisanship and incumbency are the two most powerful correlates of the vote. Consider partisanship first. If you only know whether a candidate is a Republican or Democrat, you already know a fair amount of information about those candidates. For instance, one can be almost certain that a Democrat is to the left of a Republican on the ideological spectrum (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Lee, Moretti, and Butler 2004). You might not know precisely where on the spectrum each candidate resides, but you can reliably guess which candidate is on the left and which is on the right.

Thus, the party label provides a simple, yet powerful piece of information. It is therefore not surprising that voters lean on it heavily in making their vote choice. This correlation between party identification and vote choice, however, has fluctuated over time. Reliable survey evidence only dates back to the 1950s but the nadir of party voting appears to be the early 1970s (Bartels 2000; Jacobson 2009). Since the mid-1970s there has been a steady uptick in the association between party identification and vote choice—that is, self-identified

Democrats voting for Democratic candidates, and self-identified Republicans voting for Republican candidates. These changes among the electorate are critical for understanding changes in congressional politics more broadly. The more weight that voters place on the party label will have substantial consequences for both how campaigns are waged, how Congress is organized, and the kinds of legislation that is crafted.

The other major correlate of vote choice is whether a candidate is an incumbent. All else being equal, voters are more likely to select an incumbent than a challenger. The simple fact of putting "incumbent" next to a name on the ballot, however, is not what attracts voters. Instead incumbency acts as a surrogate for the likes and dislikes that voters have about candidates. Gary Jacobson (2009) has shown, for example, that members of Congress, through their various constituency and campaign activities, acquire favorable images among the public. These favorable images then give them a leg-up over challengers (who tend to be less well known). Jacobson found that voters generally report knowing more about the incumbent than the challenger, and that voters are much more willing to report something they "like" about an incumbent than a challenger. It is this disparity in public images that translates into voters being more willing to vote for incumbents. In other words, voters find many things to like about their incumbent.

This underlying basis of incumbent-driven voting has been reinforced in recent work conducted by Stone, Maisel, and Maestes (2004). They discovered that while voters certainly care about partisanship and a candidate's issue positions, they also care about the competence of candidates. All else being equal, voters prefer candidates who demonstrate integrity and a commitment to public service. Again, this makes logical sense from the standpoint of a "low-information" voter. Voters cannot anticipate the panoply of issues that a representative will have to deal with. Nor do most voters have the time to track what a representative is doing in Washington. Instead it may be more rational to choose someone they trust to act in the best interests of the constituency, even if that constituency does not have well-informed views about what it wants (Fenno 1978). Thus, relying on simple pieces of information that signal whether a candidate is trustworthy and will act in the best interests of constituents is more efficient than gathering detailed policy information about candidates.

## Legislators and Constituents

The nature of the electoral system, and the information voters rely on, ultimately matters because it pervades politics in Washington, D.C. In the case of congressional elections, representatives, to a large extent, win election to Congress based on their own entrepreneurial efforts. They cannot depend on a party machine or presidential coattails to pull them through on Election Day. They must work hard for their own reelection. The primacy of reelection in shaping

congressional behavior was most famously propounded in David Mayhew's influential book *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (Mayhew 1974a). While representatives have many goals—securing favorable legislation, capturing positions of power within the legislature, attracting media attention, etc.—one must actually serve in Congress to achieve any of those goals. Thus, Mayhew argued that members could be treated "as if" they were single-minded seekers of reelection. The primal pursuit of reelection influences, to a profound degree, their priorities on Capitol Hill.

Notably the drive for reelection creates an incentive for members of Congress to promote localism and particularistic policymaking. Because the electoral system rewards self-reliant politicians, there is a strong incentive to pursue concentrated benefits for their district while diffusing the costs to the other 434 districts. They can then claim credit for bringing jobs and federal money back to their district. This encourages a policymaking system that divides public benefits into 435 district-sized morsels.

It would be an overstatement, however, to argue that particularistic policy runs unchecked, or that politicians spend all day at the pork-barrel trough. As we saw above, voters also rely on a candidate's party label. The party label conveys information to voters even if voters remain unaware of the arcane details of public policy. But unlike the personal reputation that a member has—which is primarily under their individual control—the reputation of the party as a whole is dependent on the actions of the other politicians who share that label. Developing a reputation as a party that can solve national problems—such as fostering economic growth, peace, or clean air—spills over to all members of that party. The label is therefore a collective good shared by all members of a party. Indeed, the importance of the party label as an informational cue provides one of the chief rationales for creating political parties. Party leaders are given the task of coordinating the diverse needs of members who share the party label. They also are tasked with preventing actions, or legislation, that might tarnish the party label (Cox and McCubbins 1993; Aldrich 1995). If members go their own way and tailor their campaigns solely to their district median, they run the risk collectively of diluting the informational value of the party label. On the other hand, members who become too tied to their party's ideology, especially where it differs from the local median voter, can face electoral punishment (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Carson et al. 2010). The need to appeal to local, diverse constituencies while at the same time remaining members of a national party creates one of the fundamental and intriguing issues in the study of Congress. The study of this dilemma has long been of interest to legislative scholars (e.g., Stokes 1967; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987). But there is still much to learn. In the conclusion to this essay I discuss how recent changes in the relationship between parties and candidates are leading to new developments in congressional elections.

## A Word about the Senate

Most of this essay has emphasized House elections. This reflects a balance of research between House and Senate elections that favors the former. Though much of what I have discussed also applies to Senate elections, there are some important distinctions worthy of attention. Senate elections themselves have undergone a number of fundamental, and fascinating, changes over time. Indeed, senators were not chosen by voters at all until the 1914 elections following passage of the Seventeenth Amendment. The job of choosing senators instead resided with state legislatures. The framers sought to insulate the Senate from public fads and temporary passions. Indirect elections, coupled with a staggered electoral cycle, were the solution. Perhaps even more so than House elections, nineteenth-century Senate elections were party-dominated affairs. Senators owed their election to fellow partisans in the state legislature (Engstrom and Kernell 2007). And by all accounts the state legislative selections of senators were bitter partisan affairs (Schiller and Stewart 2004).

In an ironic twist, however, opening up Senate elections to public participation, beginning in 1914, has made Senate elections more responsive and competitive than the House elections.

Senate elections tend to be more competitive and the swings in the partisan distribution of seats in the Senate tend to be higher. Figure 3.3 presents the number of competitive Senate races (using the 55 percent threshold) from 1952 to 2008. Overall, Senate elections are more competitive than House elections. The reasons why Senate elections remain more competitive than the House are fairly straightforward. States tend to be more heterogeneous than the average House district. The prestige of a Senate seat entices more competitive

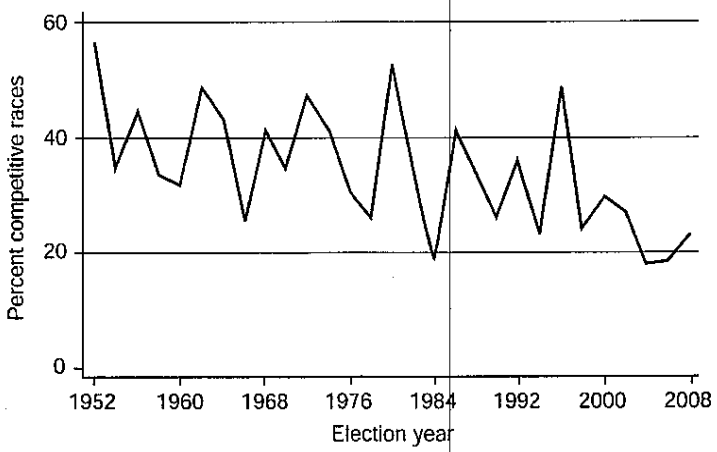


*Figure 3.3* Competitive United States Senate races (1952–2008). Winner wins with 55% of major-party vote or less.

challengers to run against incumbents. Senate races also tend to feature better financed campaigns on both sides. But even here Senate elections do indicate a general downward trend regarding competition. Given the close partisan seat balance in the Senate, the decline in state-level competition has meant an ever-increasing focus on just a handful of Senate races; those that can tip the balance between majority and minority status.

## New Directions: Congressional Elections in an Age of Party Polarization

One reason why the U.S. Congress remains a lively, and fascinating, area of scholarly research is because the institution frequently changes. This essay has examined the recent evolution of congressional elections. But congressional elections, along with the institution itself, continue to evolve. Looking forward, one question scholars have begun to ask is whether we are returning to a party-centered system. Although the strong party machines and bosses of the nineteenth century may have vanished, other partisan actors might be filling the void. The influence of ideological activists, national party committees, partisan news outlets (e.g., Fox and MSNBC), and partisan financial donors (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006) could be pushing congressional elections away from candidate-centered politics. What is interesting, from an historical perspective, is that we appear to be in an era of partisan polarization yet without the strong party organizations of the nineteenth century.

By most metrics, congressional parties are as polarized as at any time since World War II (McCarty et al. 2006). The result has been a growing reluctance by either side in Congress to compromise and a rise in obstructionist legislative tactics, especially in the Senate. As Morris Fiorina has eloquently put it: "The political class today allows national problems to fester because its members insist on having the entire loaf, not just a portion, and/or because they would rather have an election issue than incremental progress" (Fiorina 2005: 176).

While the rise of partisan polarization could be troublesome for those concerned about congressional performance, for students of congressional elections it presents a number of fascinating research questions that scholars are just now beginning to explore. To take one example, consider the current configuration of electoral and legislative politics. We live in an era of low intra-district competition *but* high levels of legislative polarization. At first glance, these two trends might seem to naturally follow from each other. Where district-level competition is low, members can take more polarized ideological positions without fear of losing. Deep red, or deep blue, districts should cause little penalty for a member of Congress who stakes out a strident roll-call record (assuming the representative is on the "correct" side of the district).

Yet looking back in history suggests that the two trends need not coincide. The nineteenth century featured high legislative polarization *and* fever-pitch competition at the district level. Legislative polarization for most of the

nineteenth century was very high, mirroring the levels that we see now in Congress. This provides scholars with something akin to a laboratory experiment to study the causes and consequences of legislative polarization. How do members behave when competition is high and polarization is high (as in the nineteenth century) compared to a period of low competition and high polarization (as in the twenty-first century)? How does Congress fashion legislation when only a minority of districts are in-play? How does Congress fashion public policy when a bevy of districts are in-play? Does Congress eschew programmatic policy in favor of targeting distributive benefits, or vice-versa?[5]

Questions such as these suggest that there is much still to learn about congressional elections. The importance of congressional elections is hard to overstate. As the other essays in this volume attest, the politics of congressional elections pervade almost everything Congress does. The drive by representatives to get to Washington, and then stay there, casts a long shadow over Capitol Hill. Thus, understanding Congress, and by implication national politics, necessitates understanding the electoral system and its impact on congressional politics.

## Notes

1 For the student interested in a more comprehensive treatment, one can do no better than reading Gary Jacobson's magisterial book, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (2009).
2 Another approach would be to compare United States congressional elections with other electoral systems around the world (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987).
3 One can engage in a bit of historical fancy wondering what would have happened had Lincoln stayed in the House of Representatives rather than returning to Illinois where he bided his time as a lawyer before reentering national politics in 1858.
4 The ballot was so-named because it was first developed in Australia during the 1850s.
5 For an early example of the kind of research I have in mind, see Brady (1973).