Chapter Four
The Choices Candidates Make: Running for Congress

The most fundamental way democracies translate popular sentiments into public action is through elections. In a well-functioning democracy, elections will appear to come off like clockwork: They will come along at the prescribed time, multiple candidates will compete for the right to hold office, and voters will go to the polls on election day to record their choice. Elections work because everyone knows and follows the rules of the game automatically. End of story.

The perspective on elections I want to emphasize in the next three chapters is slightly different from the common textbook or civics view of how elections work. The common view implicitly supposes that all the principal actors in congressional elections — voters and candidates — act out of a sense of civic duty or deeply held convictions about the public good. It is enough that an individual "wants to make a difference" to explain why someone runs for Congress. And, it is enough that a voter wants to "make a statement" or "be a good citizen" to explain why someone votes on election day.¹ Elections look automatic because, in one way or the other, everyone wants "to do the right thing" with respect to the electoral system.

I would like us to avoid focusing on the glib claims of politicians and voters about their acting in the public interest. Rather, I will suggest in this chapter that the most fruitful direction to focus on in studying congressional elections is on what political actors themselves — elites and mass alike — are trying to get out of the electoral system. I certainly will not deny that

¹The traditional civics view of congressional elections has a difficult time dealing with the motivations of one important type of political actor — the political contributor. Do contributors give money to candidates because they are public spirited (giving to candidates they agree with) or because they want to buy influence and access to politicians (giving to candidates with the best chance of winning)?
candidates and voters are, at least in part, public spirited. Nonetheless, the primary momentum behind the system of congressional elections in the United States derives from self-seeking behavior on the part of candidates and voters. If we don't at least start with the ambitions of candidates and voters, we will be lost.

Candidates and voters are different types of political animals. Most candidates for political office, particularly federal office, are professional politicians. While they all have some other "real world" job, they differ from most people in that they derive special satisfaction from acting in the political realm. Politics is different from most settings in the business world or among family and friends. Politicians are those who survive in the political world by learning to read the political portents around them. They learn to anticipate the actions of others — whether they be a mass of voters or a small number of individual rivals for office — and to make decisions based on the anticipated actions of others. In other words, they are strategic.

Voters aren’t strategic. By-and-large they respond to the choices presented to them. Voters aren’t stupid or uninformed. Rather, the roles laid out for voters and candidates are quite different, as are the settings in which they act. In order to get on the ballot to run for office, an individual must make a choice. Unless that individual has a martyr complex or a special desire to shake hands, an individual will not choose to go on the ballot unless it seems like running for office will pay off somehow. Even a highly ambitious local politician may choose to wait it out, hoping to avoid a certain defeat at the present and/or find a more fertile political field to plow in the future. At the same time, the number of likely candidates for the House or Senate from any distinct or state is likely to be relatively small in any given election year. All the serious candidates at least know of each other, can often make good estimates of the future behavior of
the others, and know that the course of action they themselves choose will have a material affect on the actions of the other potential candidates (and vice versa). Potential candidates for Congress are strategic because it is worth their while to be strategic.

Contrast this with voters. The costs of voting are very low, but so are the direct benefits that accrue to any single voter by virtue of the act of voting. Assuming that a citizen turns out to vote in an election pitting a Democrat against a Republican, there is only one course of action that makes sense for the voter — vote for the one she likes best.\(^2\) There are so many other voters in the district or state that if an individual voter chooses an outrageous course of action, such as writing in Donald Duck, that action will have no effect on the eventual outcome of the election. Indeed, there are so many other voters in any district or state that one might wonder why one should vote at all. I will leave this important point to ponder for the next chapter. For the moment I will simply remark that all a voter needs to do is wait for the candidates to present themselves, make a choice based on whatever criteria she chooses, and then vote for the one she likes best. This may be a well-considered, informed choice, but it is not strategic.

Because candidates and voters are so fundamentally different, we must discuss them differently. At the same time, we always need to be aware that we can’t entirely discuss candidates without understanding what voters are like, and vice versa. That is, the strategic interactions among potential candidates for office take place in the context of trying to anticipate who the voters will prefer in November. Voters make their decisions after watching the pre-

\(^2\)Political scientists and economists have spilled a lot of ink contemplating the meaning of this sentence. I will defer to the next chapter a full exposition of the calculus of turning out and voting.
election, primary, and general election processes and (at least in part) judge the field on how they made decisions about how to enter the race and run their campaigns.

In these three chapters, we will explore the dynamics of congressional elections by focusing sequentially on three major topics of congressional elections. The first broad topic is the strategic decisions made by the most critical actors in elections — the candidates. After exploring in Chapter 4 who runs for Congress and why, we will turn our attention in Chapter 5 to the other side of the electoral coin — the choice made by voters themselves. Finally, the electoral arena in which voters and candidates act is heavily regulated. Therefore, in Chapter 6 we will examine the regulation of congressional elections, through mechanisms such as campaign finance and redistricting laws, to understand how these regulations influence electoral outcomes.

I. Strategic Choice and Political Careers

Candidates for Congress don't just automatically appear on the ballot. To appear on a ballot, a candidate must make a series of strategic choices that are conditioned on (1) what she or he expects other potential candidates might do and (2) the benefits and costs that will be encountered in the process of running and then either winning or losing. The choices candidates make are heavily conditioned by outside factors. This is illustrated by two examples, one historical (Abraham Lincoln) and the other contemporary (the 1994 House election).

Abraham Lincoln is revered in American history for his presidential service during the Civil War. He steadfastly defended the principle of an inviolate American Union against secessionists, who wished to leave the Union, and Radical northerners, who wished to treat the states of the Confederacy as a vanquished foreign land as the North rolled to victory. Lincoln's
presidential service is well-chronicled. Less well-known is his first service in the national
government, as a member of the House from 1847 to 1849. Given Lincoln's later tireless defense
of the principle of an inviolate Union, why did he leave the House after only one term, just as the
political struggle to keep the Union together was getting interesting?

In 1994, public opinion polls indicated that voters held members of Congress in
particularly low esteem — 22% said they approved of the job that Congress was doing, 42%
believed that "most members of Congress" should be reelected and 57% stated that their own
member of the House deserved reelection. Yet in that year's congressional election, 90% of
House members and 92% of senators running for reelection won. Given the public's low regard
for incumbent members of Congress and less-than-enthusiastic support for individual incumbents,
why did virtually everyone running for reelection win?

Abraham Lincoln's short congressional career is a testimony to how service in Congress
can be influenced by the electoral environment in which candidates run. Lincoln was a Whig;

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3These numbers were taken from the Gallup/USAToday poll, and constitute the average
response to these three questions during all of 1994. An archive of Gallup/USAToday poll results
can be found on the USAToday Web page, URL: http://www.usatoday.com.

4Few of Lincoln's biographers deal fully with his congressional service. For two who did,
see Donald W. Riddle, Congressman Abraham Lincoln (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press,
See also Joel H. Silbey, "'Always a Whig in Politics': The Partisan Life of Abraham Lincoln,"
Papers of the Abraham Lincoln Association 8 (1986): 21-42 and Daniel Walker Howe The
Political Culture of the American Whigs (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). The
most recent major single-volume biography of Lincoln was David Herbert Donald, Lincoln (New
Whigs generally supported the principle of rotation in office. In the part of Illinois that Lincoln represented, the Whigs practiced a particularly strong version of rotation. Lincoln's two immediate Whig predecessors from the 7th district of Illinois had pledged to serve only a single term, and Lincoln was obliged to do the same. Even though there is evidence in Lincoln's own hand that he would have preferred to stay in Washington for another term, when he returned home he discovered local Whigs engaged in a mad scramble for the nomination, under the assumption that Lincoln would keep his word. Thus the activity of local party elites kept Lincoln from being given the chance to succeed himself in the House.

Given his great political ambitions, Lincoln was left with the option of seeking other offices, which he did. He unsuccessfully sought the position of Commissioner of the General Land Office, in 1849, and turned down an offer to become the governor of the Oregon territory.

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5The principle of rotation in office refers to allowing incumbents to hold a particular elected office for a limited number of terms. When rotation in office was common in the United States, the most frequent limitations were either two or three terms. Rotation in office is enforced by the party simply refusing to renominate an incumbent after she or he has served the maximum number of terms. Thus, a system of rotation relies on party leaders being able to keep people off the ballot, which is impossible in the modern system of primary elections where any party member may get on the nomination ballot regardless of the desires of party leaders. On the rise and fall of rotation in office, see Samuel Kernell.

6In the end, it was probably just as well that Lincoln was not given a second chance at running for Congress. The year 1848 was not especially good for Whigs, and the Whig nominee to take Lincoln's place lost to the Democratic nominee, Thomas Harris. Harris, not laboring under a one-term limitation, ran for reelection in 1850, but lost to the Whig, Richard Yates.
in 185*. 7 Twice in the 1850s he was on the ballot to become senator from Illinois, but failed each time. 8 It was as a private citizen, then, that Lincoln was nominated and elected president in 1860.

The paradox of the 1994 election — that everyone hated Congress but incumbent members of Congress were overwhelmingly reelected — illustrates a number of things about contemporary congressional elections. In this context, however, one important thing it illustrates is how unpopular incumbents may avoid electoral defeat by preempting the electoral process altogether. 9 Thus, even though 90% of the House was reelected in 1994, 48 House members (11% of the House) chose not to seek reelection in the first place — a high number for modern times. 10 Overall, 20% of the House did not return after the 1994 election, with retirement, not

7**See the Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, 11:5.** It is supposed that Lincoln turned down the opportunity for political leadership in Oregon because that territory was Democratic in sentiments. Once admitted to the Union, it was unlikely to elect a Whig to any prominent positions, and hence the job would have been a dead end for someone as politically ambitious as Lincoln.

8The second time, in 1858, was the occasion of the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates. Here is a question for the reader that these debates occasion: If state legislatures elected senators, why were Lincoln and Douglas engaged in popular debates throughout Illinois, in a search for senatorial votes?

9Another, more common, point these poll results would be used to make is how Americans seem naturally to adopt a schizophrenic view of Congress and their own representatives. In 1994, for instance, the more general the question, the more negative a reaction is invoked — 22% approved of the job of the whole institution, 42% said that most should be reelected, and 57% wanted their own House member reelected. These numbers may not be as inconsistent as most commentators tend to make them out to be. The reader will be given the opportunity to ponder this point later in the book.

10From 1946 to 1994, an average of only 8% of House members voluntarily left the institution at each election. In the 25 elections from 1946 to 1994, only two (1992 and 1978) saw more retirements than in 1994. The number of Senate retirements in 1994 — nine — was only excelled in 1978 and equalled in 1946.
electoral defeat, being the primary instrument of turnover.\textsuperscript{11} Therefore, the unpopular House of Representatives in 1994 was met with unusually high membership turnover, but this turnover was instigated as much by the choices that incumbents made about running for reelection as by the choices that voters made to oust unpopular incumbents.

To understand how elections help to channel popular sentiment into Congress, it is necessary to break up the larger question of why people run for Congress into its basic components. Just as we discovered in chapter 1 that legislative decisionmaking may be fruitfully understood by breaking any issue into its component parts, understanding the emergence of congressional candidates demands we identify the most basic considerations weighing on candidates (both potential and actual), and build from there.

At the root of candidate decisionmaking is a cost-benefit calculation. The calculation is so basic and generic, that it can be written simply:\textsuperscript{12}

\[
E(a_i) = P_i U_i - C_i 
\]  

(4-1)

Where

\textsuperscript{11}In the 25 elections from 1946 to 1994, the total retention rate of incumbents fell below 80% only five times.

\textsuperscript{12}The formulation of the expected value calculation that candidates use to evaluate whether to run for office that I use is common in the literature. Two examples of how this formulation has been used to good effect in the analysis of candidate decisions are Gordon S. Black, “A Theory of Political Ambition: Career Choices and the Role of Structural Incentives,” \textit{American Political Science Review} vol 66 (1972), pp. 144–159 and David Rohde, “Risk-Bearing and Progressive Ambition: The Case of Members of the United States House of Representatives,” \textit{American Journal of Political Science}, vol. 23 (1979), pp. 1–26. The article by Black treats the progressive ambition of city council members in the San Francisco Bay area, but its applicability to congressional elections is pretty clear.
In words, anyone who contemplates running for office must weigh the likelihood of winning, the value of the office, and the cost of achieving the office. It is obvious that the right-hand-side of Equation 4-1 must evaluate to a sum greater than zero in order for someone to run for office $i$ — the value of office (discounted by the probability of winning) must exceed the cost of running for office. What is less obvious is what constitutes the costs of running and the benefits of office, and what affects the probability of winning. The discussion in Section III will flesh out these categories, so that we might understand the candidate calculus more precisely.

An important factor that affects both the costs of running and the probability of winning is whether an incumbent currently holds the office. That is, if the person we are studying using Equation 4-1 is a private citizen, we can be pretty sure that he will have a more difficult time running for Congress if he is facing an incumbent running for reelection than if the incumbent has retired and the seat is open. The same holds if the person we are studying holds a lower political office, such as a city council or state legislative seat. The same finally holds when we are studying a member of the House who is contemplating a run for the Senate.

Furthermore, if we think carefully about Equation 4-1, we begin to realize that the costs involved in running for office come from a number of different sources. There are the obvious

$$E(a_i) = \text{the expected utility of choosing to run for office } i$$

$$P_i = \text{the probability of winning in the race for office } i$$

$$U_i = \text{the utility associated with serving in office } i$$

$$C_i = \text{the cost of running for office } i$$
costs of running for office — those associated with fundraising and a wrecked family life. One non-obvious cost of running for office is important in considering the dynamics of congressional politics: opportunity costs that arise when someone gives up a political office to run for another. In an environment in which incumbent politicians tend to get reelected regularly, giving up a seat to run for another represents a real cost to that politician in terms of whatever utility he would have received had he stayed put, rather than sought higher office.

The comments in the previous two paragraphs suggest that different types of candidates approach Equation 4-1 differently. We can divide congressional candidates into three types — incumbents, challengers, and candidates for open seats. Section IV will examine factors that are particular to each of these types of candidates.

But, before plowing into a full-blown analysis of the implications of Equation 4-1, we need to attend to one important structural feature of running for office in the United States. There is a fairly clear hierarchy to office holding in the United States. Among elected offices in the federal government, the pyramid is absolutely clear: At the top is the presidency, followed by the Senate, then the House. Within states, a similar hierarchy holds, with governors on top, state legislators next, and various local offices down below. The ambiguity arises not within the hierarchies, but in understanding how the hierarchies mesh: The governorship of any state is more sought-after than membership in the state House of Representatives, but which is better, to be a senator from New York, or the governor? These ambiguities aside, the hierarchy of elected office derives from structural features in the American political system, producing a regularized system of progressive ambition within the U.S. Thus, before settling down to examine the implications
of Equation 4-1 for the study of congressional elections, we first turn our attention to examining how this system of progressive ambition works.

II. Progressive Ambition in the United States

State politicians begin shuffle step to move up the line

By declaring her candidacy for governor, U.S. Rep. Barbara B. Kennelly, D-1st District, started a chain reaction Monday that could touch politicians with aspirations ranging from Congress to the common council in Middletown.

Four Democrats immediately confirmed they are candidates to succeed Kennelly in Congress, where she has represented the Hartford region since January 1982. At least six others said they might also enter the race.

Democrats predict the most wide-open contest in the 1st District, one of the nation’s safest Democratic seats, since 1970, when another Hartford congressman, Emilio Q. Daddario, ran for governor.

Because half the potential candidates already hold office, the stampede for the congressional race will open up other opportunities further down the political food chain.

“There's a domino effect all the way down to the city council in Middletown, West Hartford and several other communities,” said Roy Occhiogrosso, an aide to state Senate Democrats. The candidates who said they are committed to seeking Kennelly’s seat are Secretary of the State Miles S. Rapoport, 47, of West Hartford; former Senate President Pro Tem John B. Larson, 49, of East Hartford; state Rep. James McCavanagh, 57, of Manchester; and Daniel I. Papermaster, 33, of West Hartford. Papermaster is a lawyer who oversaw Hartford’s successful bid for the 1996 presidential debate.

On the list of those considering a run are Senate President Pro Tem Kevin B. Sullivan, 48, of West Hartford; state Sen. Eric Coleman, 46, of Bloomfield; state Rep. Richard D. Tulisano, 57, of Rocky Hill; and former state Treasurer Joseph M. Suggs Jr., 57, of Bloomfield...

Rapoport said this week belongs to Kennelly, but he planned to officially announce his candidacy next week. McCavanagh has similar plans. Larson said he may wait until after the municipal elections.

“Did he say what day?” state Rep. Susan Bysiewicz, D-Middletown, asked about Rapoport’s plans.

Her’s is not an idle interest.

Bysiewicz is ready to announce for Rapoport’s job, as soon as Rapoport announces for Kennelly’s job. Occhiogrosso said he suspects that somewhere in Middletown, probably on the common council, someone is thinking about Bysiewicz’s seat in the General Assembly.

Rep. Ellen Scalettar, D-Woodbridge, is another would-be secretary of the state awaiting Rapoport’s official announcement. Others are likely to emerge.

And so it goes.

Jonathan Pelto, a political consultant, said he already has heard from potential clients three levels down the food chain. All their plans, he said, were predicated on Kennelly’s seeking higher office.

Sullivan’s plans are being closely watched in West Hartford - and not only by the other three residents of that town who are potential competitors for Congress.

Names also are starting to surface as potential successors to Sullivan if he runs for Congress, instead of re-election to the state Senate. The chain reaction makes for good political gossip.

“It's a long chain,” said one West Hartford Democratic activist, who was amused by the ripple effect. “At the end of the chain, I think the guy that cuts my lawn changes, too.”

Not everyone is amused.

West Hartford’s Democratic town chairwoman, Marilyn Cohen, is in the middle of a difficult campaign to retain Democratic control of the town council.

She said she is thrilled that Kennelly is running for governor, but the Kennelly chain reaction is an unwanted distraction right now.
The career ambition of politicians is the engine of electoral dynamics. The United States has an overabundance of people who want to serve in politics and are exceptionally skilled at seeking office. They seek political power, but not blindly. Seeking power is costly. There is a word for people who pursue goals without regard for the cost — bankrupt. (We might also add another word — masochist.) Potential aspirants for office, therefore, are most likely to act on their goals if the costs are relatively low or the chances of success are relatively high.

The sheer number of elected positions in the United States, coupled with the system of federalism that overlays the political landscape, provides a natural way for politically ambitious people to seek political career advancement at a relatively low incremental cost. In particular, it is common to witness rookie House and Senate members enter who started their political careers in a local elected office, moved on to a state office, and then used the state office as the springboard to Washington. At each step along the way, the latitude afforded the office sought gradually increased — each step along the way constituted moving on to "higher office." Equally important, however, is the fact that at each step along the way, the constituency of the old elected position was a subset of the constituency of the new position. A career in elected office, therefore, is often a matter of winning a majority in a small constituency, shoring up that constituency through diligent service, and then using the smaller constituency as a base in trying to win in a larger constituency. Joseph Schlesinger, in his 1966 study of political ambition in the
United States, coined the phrase "progressive ambition" to describe the aspirations of politicians who desire to use service in a lower office as a stepping stone to higher office.\footnote{Schlesinger actually delineated three types of political ambition. \textit{Discrete ambition} describes a politician who seeks office for a single term and then retires. \textit{Static ambition} pertains to a politician who seeks an office as the ultimate end, with no desire to move on. \textit{Progressive ambition} describes cases where a politician holds an office and then tries to move on, using that office as a springboard.}

One simple example of how progressive ambition often works is the electoral career of Rep. Michael Harrington, a native of Salem, Massachusetts who represented Salem and the environs north of Boston in the House of Representatives from 1969 to 1979. There were two formal stepping stones to the House in Harrington's career: Salem City Council (1960 – 1963) and Massachusetts House of Representatives (1964 – 1969). Figure IV-1 illustrates the boundaries of Harrington's successive constituencies.

Harrington served in the Salem City Council for four years, first as the representative from Ward 1, and then as one of the city’s \textit{at-large} (i.e., city-wide) councilors. He was then elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives from the 6th district of Essex County, which almost perfectly corresponded with the Salem city limits. In the process of rising through local politics, Harrington also established a law practice in Salem, which is the seat of Essex County, and represented Essex County on the Democratic state committee.
When the incumbent of the sixth congressional district died in 1969, Harrington was well-placed to run to replace him, since Harrington represented the second-largest city in the district and had developed deep political ties in the most politically important part of the county. He continued to represent the 6th district until he retired from the House in 1979.

Tab. IV-1 The circumstance of a politician's rise up the ranks is dependent enough on local conditions that not everyone rises up to Congress in paradigmatic fashion, as Harrington did. Yet a quick look in virtually every direction reveals patterns similar to that of Michael Harrington's. For instance, Table IV-1 summarizes the electoral careers of Harrington's Massachusetts colleagues in 1969. Eight of Harrington's eleven House colleagues first entered Congress either directly from a lower office or having served in a lower elective office within two years of entering the House. The two senators likewise followed an incrementally upward path. The junior senator, Edward Brooke, was serving in a state-wide elected office (Attorney General) when he was elected to the Senate. (Prior to that, he had chaired the finance commission of the city of Boston.) The senior senator, Edward M. Kennedy, was elected to take the place of his brother, who had been elected to the presidency from the Senate.

Even though Ted Kennedy was elected to the Senate aided by his family's name, his brief legal career was paradigmatic for ambitious politicians. The younger Kennedy procured an appointment as an assistant district attorney in the county that encompasses Boston, the state's

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14 Most of Essex County's population and political strength lies in its south, and hence for decades the member of Congress from the north shore of Boston has come from Salem and the surrounding towns and cities of Danvers, Beverly, and Peabody.

15 Keep in mind that many of the careers summarized in Table IV-1 were complicated by military service during World War II.
political center-of-gravity. The position of assistant district attorney is a frequent entry-level position for young lawyers interested in a political career, since it provides an easy introduction to the legal community of the locale and an opportunity to score points with voters by putting miscreants behind bars. Certainly Kennedy had no interest in spending his career chasing petty criminals through the Boston courthouses — his first job was a political stepping stone.

Massachusetts is known as an unusually political state and the late 1960s is far removed from current times, so to illustrate the enduring hierarchical nature of political ambition in the United States, we finally turn our attention to the House freshman class of 1995 (elected in 1994). This is an appropriate class to focus on to illustrate the endurance of the structure of progressive ambition in American politics, since 1994 was a year when incumbents were widely discredited and many successful House candidates ran on "outsider" and "anti-politician" themes. If any modern group of House members should have broken the political careerist mold, it should have been them.

The 104th Congress had 84 new House members. Of these, 38 were either serving in some elective office at the time of their election to the House or had served as recently as the 1992 election. Another 5 had served in elective office sometime in the past. Finally, 17 had served either in some appointed political position (like police chief or U.S. attorney) or on the staff of a political official (such as governor or U.S. senator). Thus about two-thirds of the House freshman class in 1995 were on a political upward track, which is a stunning fraction in a year when politicians were said to be discredited as a class.

Very little research has been done about progressive ambition in the United States before the twentieth century. What limited information we do have suggests that some of the patterns
we have observed in modern times had their antecedents earlier. Certainly the origins of members of Congress have always been in local politics. For instance, of the 88 rookie members of the House who were elected in 1880 to the 47th Congress, 71 had served in politics prior to being elected to the House. Among rookie senators in the 47th Congress, 14 of the 16 new senators came from a political background. Moving further back in time, among the 65 members of the First Congress under the Constitution, 62 had a background either in state government or the government under the Articles of Confederation.

Although Congress has always drawn the bulk of its members from lower political offices, one important thing that has changed with the times is the degree to which Congress is a place politicians want to settle down. For the first half of American history Congress, both the House and Senate, served as a stepping stone to further political office for professional office seekers, either back in the states from which they came or in an appointive position in the federal bureaucracy or judiciary.

Hence, for example, virtually all the members of the first Congress (1789–91) had a background in state government or in the old government of the Confederation. Most of those, when they eventually left Congress, would hold yet another political office, most likely back home. To be precise, 35 of the first 65 House members and 16 of the first 26 senators left Congress to pursue another political career. By the end of the nineteenth century things had begun to change a bit, with the Senate becoming the ultimate political destination for many of its members.

Because, in 1997, there are still House members who were elected in the mid-1950s, it isn’t possible to give a similar accounting of the eventual political careers of contemporary members of Congress. Still, the eventual political careers of MCs first elected in 1952 give us an idea about how things had changed since the 1880s. Of the 82 rookie House members in 1953 (which included future-Speaker Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neil), 59 went no higher than the House of Representatives; 23 of the 29 first-term senators found the Senate to be their last political office. (One of the six rookie senators who went on to higher office was John F. Kennedy, who was elected president in 1960.)

The most comprehensive analysis of political ambition in Congress during the nineteenth century was conducted by Samuel Kernell (1977). Kernell’s goal was to explain why the average level of turnover in the House dropped steadily from 57% each election in the 1850s to 27% in the first decade of the 1900s. Most of the drop in turnover during this period can be attributed to changes in the ambition structure of American politics, with a substantial portion of the drop attributable to a drop in partisan competition in congressional districts and a small residual due to the decline of the norm of rotation.  

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18In other words, part of the reason more House members were reelected as the 19th century progressed was that congressional districts as a whole came to be dominated by one of the two political parties. Thus, fewer incumbents were defeated for reelection by a candidate of the opposite party. Rotation-in-office, on the other hand, was the practice of requiring incumbents to step down after serving a small number of terms, so that someone else of the same party would have a chance. (Recall that this is why Abraham Lincoln served only one term in the House.) With the rise of primary elections in the late 1800s to determine who the party nominees would be, party organizations lost the ability to enforce the practice of rotation, and thus it died out.
Thus, while misty-eyed romantics may believe otherwise, the United States has always had a political class, even though its size and composition have changed with the times. In modern times this phenomenon has led to the creation of a label — "career politicians" — to describe people who are so interested in public office and good at achieving it that they spend their adult lives in elective office. Americans have not always had career politicians in this sense. The notion of a "career" as we understand it is mostly a twentieth century phenomenon and the compensation of public officials used to be so little that politicians always had to keep a hand in their "real" jobs. Still, it is important to recognize that congressional politics has always operated in a context in which most candidates for Congress are including congressional service as a part of a larger political career.

The career of Abraham Lincoln is one example of how political ambition can operate in the face of severe external constraints, such as the practice of rotation in office. First, Lincoln's political life was one of continually expanding his constituency base: Before he even tried for elective office, he traveled around southern Illinois, practicing law in local towns, following itinerant judges. As Lincoln traveled, he made political contacts and gradually developed a personal following. Lincoln's first political step was running for the state legislature. This state legislative district provided the political base on which Lincoln built his later run for the U.S. Congress. But, this is where the nineteenth century path diverges from the twentieth century. Barred by his local party (which controlled renomination) for running for Congress again, Lincoln sought to stay in politics by seeking appointed office, within the system of spoils that operated at the time. Finding nothing to his liking, Lincoln continued to build his popular base in ways that are well-recorded in the history books.
III. The Costs and Benefits of Running for Office (or, Equation 4-1 Revisited)

Equation 4-1 lays out the basic calculation that any politician needs to perform when deciding whether to run for office and which office to run for. Within the system of progressive ambition I just discussed, the calculation that is usually performed looks something like this:

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E(a_L) = P_L U_L - C_L \\
E(a_H) = P_H U_H - C_H
\]

(4-2)

where the “L” subscript refers to the lower office and “H” refers to the higher office. To be even more specific, when we are thinking about (potential) candidates for the House, the higher office is the House while the lower office is typically some state or local position. When we are thinking about the Senate, the lower office includes not only state and local positions, but the House, as well.

In examining Equation (4-2), it is easy to see why even ambitious politicians will seek higher office after only careful consideration, because it is so risky. It is obvious that the costs for running for higher office are higher than running for lower office, if for no other reason than a congressional district is bound to be several times larger than even the largest district of a lower office.\(^{19}\) Likewise, before even taking into account what happens during a campaign, and leaving

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\(^{19}\)The one major exception to this sentence is in California, where there are currently fewer state senators (40) than members of the U.S. House (52). In 1988 — the last year for when there were good campaign finance statistics from California — the median amount spent by winners in state senate races was about $300,000, while the median spent by the winners in the California House races was about $400,000. (California had 45 members of the U.S. House in 1988.) This California example should alert you to how the costs of running for office are determined, in part, by the value of the office being sought. Although state senate districts have more constituents to reach, U.S. House districts are a more valuable prize. On net, the greater
value of a U.S. House seat dominates the larger population of a state senate district, leading to the slightly higher campaign spending for U.S. House. Even with that said, however, the costs associated with running for the U.S. House are in the same ballpark as running for the California state senate, which should make California state senators obvious potential candidates for the House. In a state like Wyoming or Vermont, each of which has 30 state senators and only one U.S. House seat, the cost of running for the U.S. House is going to be much, much greater than continuing to run for state senate, and thus relative cost is more likely to be a deterrent to moving up in small states.

An incumbent politician in a lower elected office is “king of the hill” with respect to politics at that level in that location. But, if he wants to branch out, he has to contend with dozens of similarly-successful and qualified opponents. In the case of a state senator from Wyoming, for instance, he has to worry about the other 29 state senators who also might run for the U.S. House. It is likewise the case that, as we burrow down further in the hierarchy of elective office, we encounter constituencies that are more and more heterogeneous. A politician

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20 See Black, “A Theory of Political Ambition,” for a discussion of how the size of a political unit and degree of political competition affects the riskiness of political ambition.

21 This point was a central feature of James Madison’s argument in favor of the Constitution found in Federalist # 10:

The smaller the society, the fewer probably will be the distinct parties and interests composing it; the fewer the distinct parties and interests, the more frequently will a majority be found of the same party; and the smaller the number of individuals composing a majority, and the smaller the compass within which they are placed, the more easily will they concert and execute their plans of oppression. Extend the sphere and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult
who has succeeded at that level may, or may not, be successful in broadening his political base. By running for higher office, he is taking a risk that he may be unsuccessful in convincing different types of voters to vote for him — he won’t know until he tries. Therefore, to the degree that any politician who has a firm political base contemplates running for office in a larger constituency that is likely to have different political interests, his \emph{a priori} probability of winning in the new constituency must, on average, be lower than his probability of winning in the old one.

Tab. IV-2 Running for higher office is daunting, but many people do it. Therefore, we shouldn’t dwell too long on the fact that, for most politicians most of the time, $E(U_L) > E(U_H)$. Instead, what we should be doing is understanding the different components that make up the cost-, benefit-, and winning probability calculations. Table IV-2 makes an initial attempt at disaggregating the different components of Equation (4-2).

In examining Table IV-2, you should keep in mind that each of the factors listed there come into play \emph{cross-sectionally} and across time. Consider the first entry in the table. It is obvious that different political offices come attached with different degrees of political power. The differences that occur in relative power among different political offices (e.g., U.S. House, U.S. Senate, state house, state senate, mayor, city council) at any given point in time are the \emph{cross-sectional} differences in power. Thus, if we were to look at the array of public offices that were contained within a House district, the largest gap in office-specific benefits would probably be between service in a position such as a school board members and service in the House.

for all who feel it to discover their own strength and to act in unison with each other.

Viewed from the perspective of a politician trying to succeed within the Madisonian world, life in a larger collection of citizens is more politically perilous than life in a smaller society.
Therefore, if the decision to run for higher office were based *solely* on relative benefit, we would expect to see lots of school board members running for Congress, fewer mayors, and still fewer state senators.\(^{22}\)

If we step away from any individual congressional district and now cast our gaze across all congressional districts, we see how another set of cross-sectional differences in the relative benefits derived from various political offices come into play. In some regions of the country, mayors are enormously powerful. (Think of Chicago.) In other regions, mayors are mostly ceremonial. (Think of most of New England.) Even within states, some cities have strong mayors (like Boston, Massachusetts) while others have extremely weak ones (like Cambridge, Massachusetts). Consequently, to the degree that the decision by a mayor about whether to run for Congress is made based on how valuable the mayorality is compared to Congress, weak mayors should be more likely to run than strong mayors, small-city mayors should run for frequently than large-city mayors, etc.

Finally, the value of a congressional seat relative to that of other political offices has changed across time. As the value has changed, it has opened up a different set of lower offices as stepping stones to Congress.

Thus, we can think of each of the factors listed in Table IV-2 as varying cross-sectionally and across time. Let us examine each of them in turn.

\(^{22}\)Of course, the point of this chapter is that the decision to run for higher office is not based *solely* on the relative benefit of serving in different offices. There is another reason why we don’t see a constant onslaught of school board members running for Congress — most school board members probably aren’t progressively ambitious.
The relative benefit derived from office

Scope of legislative authority. The authority of Congress has certainly changed over the past two centuries, and as it has, so, too, has the value of serving in Congress. In the early days of the Republic, the federal government was a relatively weak entity, with little reach into citizens' lives. One consequence of this was that members of Congress cycled quickly through the institution, looking for better opportunities elsewhere. For instance, during the 1810s, 18% of all House members who were eligible for reelection voluntarily left the House. In his study of the House of Representatives early in the 19th century (1801 – 1828), James Sterling Young concluded that House members served short tours of duty in Washington precisely because real political power resided elsewhere — back home in state governments — and therefore ambitious politicians returned home as soon as possible.23

In the last two-thirds of the twentieth century the federal government's reach grew significantly, and along with it grew the legislative responsibilities of Congress. One consequence of this is surely the fact that retirement rates have been much lower in recent decades than in the earliest years of the Republic. For instance, in the 1980s only 6% of all House members eligible for reelection retired. Political scientists such as Morris Fiorina24 have attributed low congressional turnover in recent years directly to the expansion of the federal government's power, and hence to Congress's.

Political and policy resources within the institution. Congress employs resources — money and personnel — to effect the political and policy goals of its members. So, too, do other

23James Sterling Young, *The Washington Community*.

24See Fiorina's *Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establishment*. 
legislatures. The scope of congressional resources devoted to policy and politics is staggering. In 1996, the Legislative Branch Appropriations Bill amounted to over $2.5 billion. The legislative branch employed over 25,000 people. The average senator employed over 40 people in his personal office, the average House member, 17.

These statistics dwarf all state legislatures, but they dwarf some more than others. Eight states, for instance, have full-time, year-round staff for all the members of the state legislature. At the other end of the spectrum, two states (Wyoming and South Dakota) have no personal staff for their legislators. Thus, an ambitious politician in the Wyoming state senate will be relatively more covetous of the institutional resources of an MC than a state senator in a state like California, New York, or Massachusetts.

*Pay and perquisites.* Related to resources that can be marshaled in policymaking are the private resources — pay and perquisites — that can be gained by serving in Congress compared to other offices. All members of Congress receive generous compensation. The salary alone for members of Congress in 1997 was $133,600.

As with institutional policymaking resources, local offices vary tremendously in what they pay their legislators and other political officials. The only state officials whose pay even approaches MCs are the governors of some large industrial states whose pay is well over $100,000 per year. (In 1997 the highest-paid governor was New York’s George Pitaki at $130,000.) State legislators are paid nothing close to MCs. New York legislators, who are the nation’s best-paid, still make only about one-third the salary of MCs ($57,000).

While many MCs will protest that they aren’t in politics for the money, the most comprehensive study of pay-induced career decisions about members of Congress bears out the
conjecture that congressional pay is related to the choice whether to run or not. Examining the number of retirements in the House from 1900 to 1980, Hibbing (1991) discovered that in election years following a congressional pay increase, the number of retirements decreased significantly; when the congressional pension plan was significantly improved, the next election tended to exhibit more retirements.

The value in achieving even higher office. Precisely because of the system of nested constituencies, offices are seen as springboards for other offices. If we suppose that ambitious politicians have long-range career plans, like other professionals, then certain offices will be valuable because of what they lead to, not because of what they are intrinsically. As I mentioned previously in noting the career path of Senator Edward Kennedy, the office of assistant district attorney is a common stepping stone to one’s first elected office — so common that the heir of the country’s most valuable political name was willing to take the position even though it was beneath him socially.

The value of congressional seats as grooming stations has certainly changed over the years. In the 1810s, Henry Clay coveted his House seat — and particularly his role as House Speaker — because it allowed him to take an active role in directing American foreign policy during the war against England. Because at the time the position of Secretary of State was seen as the stepping stone to the presidency, Clay’s presidential ambitions helped to determine how valuable his House seat was — the House seat was seen as a stepping stone to being Secretary of State, which was a stepping stone to the presidency. Once it was clear that he would never be elected president, Clay was elected to the Senate, where he could take an even more central position in the regional politics of the day, but now out of the presidential spotlight. In the mid-
twentieth century, as three out of four presidents (Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson) arose from
the Senate, presidentially-ambitious politicians momentarily re-aimed their fire at the Senate, away
from state governments, in their hunt for the great white house.

The probability of victory

The factors that go under the heading of the probability of victory are those structural situations
that constrain how well a candidate could do in a district even if he were to run the “best” race
possible. Such factors, which are outside the control of the (potential) candidates in the short-
term, include partisan, geographic, and personal considerations.

Party identification. Although allegiance to political parties has waned over the past half-
century, partisanship is still the strongest cue that voters respond to. Consequently, an ambitious
politician needs to weigh the benefits that are likely to derive from a successful contesting of a
House and Senate seat by the likelihood that someone from that party could win in that particular
district.

The strength of party affects both the willingness of lower-level politicians to try for
Congress and the level at which they try. A Republican state legislator in the inner suburbs
around Boston, for instance, would have virtually no chance winning a U.S. House seat, given the
strength of the Democratic party in and around Boston. Winning the Senate would be difficult for
the same Republican state legislator, but if she were to run for Senate, at least she could find a
base of strength in the more Republican areas of the state. Consequently, we shouldn’t be
surprised when incumbents in lower offices “leapfrog” intermediate elections, if the more
proximate constituencies contain hostile partisan terrain.
Although partisanship is fairly stable in most regions in the short term, population characteristics do evolve in most locales, and oftentimes this evolution can shift the partisan base from under an incumbent. This evolution has been most evident in recent years in the gradual growth of the Republican party in the traditionally-Democratic south. As Republican party identification in the south has grown since the early 1960s, so, too, have incumbent Democrats found it not worth their while to seek reelection while Republicans have begun to build progressive political careers in the south. The end result has been a slow, but profound, shift in the partisanship of representation from the south over the past generation.

Tab. IV-3 Partisan tides. Not only do districts differ with respect to their receptiveness to candidates of the two parties, partisan fortunes also fluctuate at the national level from year-to-year. The most regular fluctuation in party fortunes comes in midterm elections (i.e., elections held between two presidential elections). Table IV-3 illustrates how partisan tides have disadvantaged the president’s party in the second half of the twentieth century — showing a pattern that stretches back to at least the Civil War. In more recent years, the president’s party has lost an average of 26 House seats in midterm elections and almost 4 Senate seats. Some years are worse than others — notice the devastating years of 1958, 1966, 1974, and 1994 and compare them to the milder rejections of 1962, 1986, and 1990.

The implications of this pattern are two-fold. First, in general, politicians of the president’s party are always cautious at midterm — incumbent retire at a slightly higher rate and challengers appear at a lower rate. Second, some years are known ahead of time to be worse than others, which redoubles the midterm effects. The best instance of this was 1974, an election held in the midst of the Watergate scandal. With the popular press predicting the demise of the
Republican party due to the scandals emanating from the Republican White House, Republican politicians at all levels ran for the hills.

Districting changes. The Constitution provides for a decennial census for the purpose of redistributing House seats among the states in proportion to population. (See Chapter 6 for a discussion of districting issues.) Even when states don’t experience greater-than-average population changes over the course of a decade, population typically redistributes itself enough within all states to make some redrawing of districts necessary – to meet the Supreme Court’s requirement that districts be equal in population.

Redrawn districts are rarely politically neutral. As a different set of congressional districts is overlaid on existing local political boundaries, political options are opened and foreclosed for different group of aspiring politicians.

Fig. IV-2 A good illustration of this effect is the redistricting of Northern Virginia over the past three decades, following the rapid growth of the Washington, D.C. suburbs with respect to the rest of the state, and the rapid growth of the outer ring of Washington suburbs compared to the older suburbs of Arlington and Alexandria. (Figure IV-2 shows the evolution of Northern Virginia’s districts over these years. The solid lines show the congressional districts. The counties are shaded according to Republican strength in the 1996 president election — the darkest counties are strongly Republican, the white counties are strongly Democratic, and the lighter-shaded counties are moderately Republican.)
The two districts from Northern Virginia were the 10th and 8th Congressional Districts. Both districts had been relatively unchanged from the 1950s through the 1980s. Each had a Democratic urban area connected to a mostly-Republican suburban area. In the case of the 10th District, the urban area was Arlington County; the 8th’s urban core was Alexandria. The 8th’s suburban area was the southern half of Fairfax County (an enormous bedroom community of Washington), Mount Vernon, and a collection of other “colonial” suburbs. The 10th’s suburbs were the northern half of Fairfax County and the smaller (in population) rural area of Loudin County.

When districts came to be redrawn after the 1980 census, the Virginia legislature chose to keep districts virtually unchanged, and thus kept the political fortunes of the two incumbent House members virtually unchanged. Both Frank Wolf (10th district) and Stan Parris (8th) were long-term incumbent Republican House members. But, because the two districts included substantial cores of Democratic strength, neither had ever been able to win election easily, and both had faced a long line of well-financed Democratic challengers.

Population continued to surge in northern Virginia during the 1980s. Unlike most population shifts around the country, which tended to favor the Republican outer suburbs and disfavor inner-city areas, the population surge in northern Virginia was more politically balanced.

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25 The same logic that makes San Francisco the hub of northern California, rather than of middle California makes the Washington suburbs of Virginia northern Virginia, not northeast Virginia. Although the 7th congressional district (in the 1970s and 1980s) included the northernmost portion of the state, it was not considered to be part of northern Virginia politically, and hence I ignore it for the remainder of this discussion.

26 Don’t be deceived by Arlington’s small size on the map and its designation as a county. Arlington was — and is — a city in how it behaves, looks, and feels politically. It is densely-populated, like a city, and home to an ever-changing mix of ethnic residents.
So, as Wolf and Parris were gaining more Republican-minded constituents in the outer reaches of their districts, they were also gaining Democrats in the inner reaches around Arlington and Alexandria. The precariousness of the two’s political standing was driven home in 1990, when Parris lost the general election to a Democrat, Jim Moran,

After the 1990 census results were announced, the previous strategies of redrawing districts in Northern Virginia were no longer possible. Population growth was so much that another district had to be added. How was this growth accommodated? In two ways. First, the 8th and 10th districts were redrawn to accommodate the political needs of the incumbents. Democratic Arlington was shifted to the 8th district, which furthermore had most of its Republican areas excised. The 10th district, free of Arlington, was catapulted far to the west to pick up counties that were even more Republican than Fairfax County. Second, a new district, the 11th, was created in the region immediately to the west of Arlington and Alexandria. In politically-contestable territory, this new district is likely to inherit the political dynamics of the two older 8th and 10th districts.

What effects did this redistricting have on candidate strategies? There are at least two answers. First, it made the political careers of the two incumbents — Wolf and Moran — virtually bulletproof. Witness the effects on the two men’s political chances — particularly Wolf’s — by the percentage of votes each received in their reelection fights:

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<td>Wolf</td>
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27Moran was first elected in 1990.
In the notation of equation (4-2), $P_{\text{continued re-election to the House}}$ has gone up for both men. Consequently, both are probably much less likely to voluntarily relinquish their office, either to retire or seek higher office. Likewise, $P_{\text{knocking off the incumbent}}$ has dropped for anyone considering a run against the two, leading to a considerable drop in the quality of the challengers they face.

Second, the creation of a new congressional district in an area that had been represented by a series of long-serving incumbents opened up political opportunities in the 11th district. The district, as drawn, was expected to lean Republican. As a consequence, five prominent Republicans contested the primary to be the first representative from the district. Unfortunately for the Republicans, a Democrat, Leslie Byrne, won the seat in 1992, riding the coattails of President Clinton. This result brought another strong, locally-prominent Republican, Tom Davis, to the fore to oppose Byrne in 1994. The Republican won in 1994.

During the time when Parriss and Wolf were heavily-entrenched incumbents, their invincibility suppressed higher political ambitions among northern Virginia’s Republicans. In other words, the probability that an ambitious young Republican could knock off either Parris or Wolf in a party convention was virtually zero. Therefore, almost no one tried; politically-ambitious Republicans from northern Virginia either cast their eyes away from Washington or left politics after hitting a glass ceiling. By moving the two local congressional incumbents out of the way, the 1990s redistricting created a short-term turbulence in the probability of winning higher office among Republicans in central Fairfax county. This led, in turn, to the ready appearance of

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28 Until recently, Virginia was one of the few states still to have party nominating conventions, rather than primaries. Virginia law has recently changed, resulting in a growth in the number of primaries there, but conventions are still common, too.
attractive local Republican candidates who fought to rise through the ranks to claim a higher political reward.

Scandals. Aside from the normal controversy that attends anyone in political life, periodically members of Congress are faced with problems that make them stand out. A political scandal — such as charges of bribery and sexual improprieties — which calls into question the ability of an incumbent MC to perform her or his official duties can change the political landscape quickly and significantly. In the most comprehensive study of the effects of political scandals on House elections, Welsh and Peters (1980) discovered that being caught up in a scandal costs incumbents between 6 and 11 percentage points in the polls the next time they run for reelection. Abramowitz (1988) found similar results for the Senate.

The Peters and Welch estimate of a 6-to-11 point vote loss due to political scandals undoubtedly underestimates the electoral seriousness of scandals. That is because we observe this vote loss only among incumbents who choose to run for reelection despite the fact their names have been tarnished. A potential challenger, observing a scandal, is likely to revise his estimates of how successful he would be, should he run. Hence, scandals are likely to bring out a better crop of challengers. Fearing a grueling reelection battle, and knowing that the probability of reelection has dropped, an incumbent is more likely to retire from Congress rather than risk reelection.

The costs of running for office

Rounding out the calculus of election are the costs associated with running for office. The most obvious course of costs in running for Congress are the money, time, and personnel needed to
The number of House and Senate members leaving Congress to pursue a lobbying career fluctuates from year-to-year. The *Washington Post* reported (December 29, 1996, p. A04) that only three of the fifteen retiring senators in 1996 (20%) remained in Washington after leaving the Senate. This compared to 17 of the 23 senators (52%) who remained inside the Beltway after retiring or being defeated in 1992 and 1994.

Opportunity costs. One cost of running for reelection that is usually overlooked is what economists call *opportunity costs*. The opportunity cost of doing X instead of Y is the additional benefit that would have been gained if Y had been done instead. Put concretely in terms of congressional careers, when a member of Congress decides to run for reelection, she forgoes other opportunities, at least in the short-run, such as races for higher office, jobs in the private sector, and spending more time with their families. When Congresswoman A decides to run for the Senate, she is foregoing the benefits she would have received had she stayed in the House. Because the reelection rate is so high, choosing not to run for reelection constitutes a real risk for most elected politicians trying to move up the electoral ladder. Giving up a lower office is a cost in and of itself.

Opportunity cost calculations affect not only decisions about whether to run for some other office, but also decisions about whether to leave politics for the private sector. Many members of Congress in their mid-40s and 50s would be extremely valuable additions to law firms and lobbying operations, and these firms would be happy to pay enormously high salaries to lure these incumbents to their firms. In general, then, the decision to run for reelection, instead of

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29 The number of House and Senate members leaving Congress to pursue a lobbying career fluctuates from year-to-year. The *Washington Post* reported (December 29, 1996, p. A04) that only three of the fifteen retiring senators in 1996 (20%) remained in Washington after leaving the Senate. This compared to 17 of the 23 senators (52%) who remained inside the Beltway after retiring or being defeated in 1992 and 1994.
seeking some other opportunity — electoral or otherwise — is made in the context of the value to the member of Congress of doing something else.

**Number and quality of other candidates.** It goes without saying that it costs money to run an election campaign. What may be less obvious is that how much it costs will depend on who one is running against. For a holder of a lower office, running in a general election against an incumbent is likely to be much more expensive than running in a general election against the non-incumbent candidate of the opposite party when the incumbent retires. Incumbents, likewise, face a costlier reelection battle when they are running against challengers who have lots of political experience — and thus know how to raise money — than when they face neophytes.

**Fundraising efficiency.** Fundraising is a necessary evil in American politics. Although all successful high-level politicians are better than average at doing it, not everyone is equally good, and not everyone enjoys it equally as much. There are some who revel at the opportunity of jawboning prominent individuals and interest groups for campaign funds. Others hate it. It is the ones who enjoy fundraising and are good at it who are more likely to run over a long course of elections, while it is the ones who are particularly bad at it who eventually decline to run.

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30You may want to think about this problem, however: If you were an incumbent of a lower office in a congressional district held by a politically-safe member of the opposition party, would it cost you less to run against the incumbent or to wait until the incumbent retired? If we consider only the general election, the answer is obvious: unseating an incumbent costs more than winning against the nominee of the incumbent’s party once the seat comes open. However, when the seat comes open, there’s likely to be a scramble for the nomination of both parties. Therefore, if you choose to run now — and oppose the incumbent in the general election — you can probably get the nomination at a low cost. If you wait — and choose to oppose the nominee of the incumbent’s party in the general election after the incumbent’s retirement — you will possibly have to fight a highly-contested primary to get the nomination. Thus, it is not obvious whether taking on incumbents or waiting for them to retire is always the low-cost strategy. Unfortunately, not enough empirical research has been done to answer this question, so the answer remains a matter of speculation.
Spending efficiency. The other side of the campaign finance coin is the efficiency with which campaign contributions can be turned into political support. Districts vary in how they are configured — geographically, demographically, and with respect to the media. In some states, for instance, television markets coincide closely with congressional districts, and thus television advertising (a very efficient method of reaching voters) can easily be relied on. Other states, however, are less well served by existing television markets, either because many districts are crowded into single media markets (e.g., in New York City) or because so many large-city markets serve highly rural states (e.g., Wyoming). Where "wholesale" campaign techniques are easily implemented, the fund raising advantages of incumbents can be amplified to lower the cost of running for reelection, and thus increase the incidence of incumbent longevity.

One factor that influences the efficiency of translating resources into votes is the size of the constituency that an incumbent must reach. Most obviously, senators generally represent much larger constituencies than House members, must exert more effort in fund raising to gain reelection, and thus feel the costs of running for office more acutely than House members. Less obviously, even House districts experience vast variations in how many voters turn out to vote. For most of the twentieth century the south was uniformly Democratic, and thus general elections were often uncontested. (Even primaries were rarely contested.) Not surprisingly, southern members of Congress tended to retire at low rates, in part because the number of mobilized voters needed for reelection was minuscule.

* * *

The “calculus of election” that I have discussed in this section is generic to all ambitious political candidates, and thus has a place in the decisions that all candidates for Congress — or potential
candidates — undertake. Moving beyond the generic calculus, however, different types of candidates weigh the different factors differently. The most basic differentiation of candidates’ calculi comes about because some are incumbents and others aren’t. Among the non-incumbents, some are considering (or actually) running against an incumbent, while others are running for an open seat, without an incumbent present. It is, therefore, to the particularities of these different candidates’ considerations that I finally turn my attention in this chapter.

IV. Incumbents, Challengers, and Open Seat Candidates

Incumbents

The power of incumbency has been the subject of much discussion since the success rates of incumbents running for reelection began rising so rapidly in the mid-1980s. While the reelection rate — the rate at which incumbents running for reelection win their seat back — in the House had averaged about 90% from 1946 until 1980, it began creeping steadily upward in the 1980s, until it reached 98.3% in 1988.31 Even before the House reelection rate flirted with the 100% mark, scholars had begun to notice that a measurable and significant incumbency advantage had emerged around the mid-1960s. The incumbency advantage is defined as the increment of the vote that an incumbent running for reelection receives by virtue of being the incumbent, rather than the incumbent's party's nominee in an open seat race. From the mid-1960s to the end of the 1980s, King and Gelman (199*) estimate the incumbency advantage in House elections was about 8%, which boosted most incumbents from being electorally marginal to being electorally safe.

31The reelection rate in the Senate likewise crept up, averaging 75% from 1946 to 1988, but reaching 96.9% in 1990.
While the incumbency success rate certainly increased in the 1980s and a large incumbency advantage began appearing in the mid-1960s, one should be cautious in inferring that the result was a reduction in turnover in the House and Senate. Indeed, the turnover rate (the percentage of the chamber that leaves at the end of each election) remained virtually unchanged during this period. At least two factors help to explain this paradoxical phenomenon. First, although incumbents started winning by larger electoral margins, large electoral margins in one election became less of a guarantee of a large electoral margin (or even victory) the next election (Mann 1977; Jacobson 1987). Second, retirement from the chamber began to take up the slack from electoral defeat in accounting for turnover in the chambers. In the 1950s and 1960s, retirements from the House averaged 28 each election, electoral defeat (in primaries and general elections) averaged 34, leaving average total turnover at 62 seats. In the 1970s and 1980s retirements averaged 37 each election, electoral defeats averaged 25, leaving the same number (62) to leave at the end of each election. Turnover stayed the same, but its sources changed.

Even though incumbents do periodically lose reelection, and even more retire before being tossed out, the most important question facing incumbent members of Congress each two or six years is whether to retire from the chamber — either to retire outright or to seek higher office in the Senate or presidency. Because reelection rates are so high, it is not surprising that so many incumbent MCs choose to run for reelection. But, the probability of reelection is not 1, and so there must be some factors that are especially compelling in getting MCs to retire.

Much research has gone into explaining why some incumbents retire and others seek reelection. Among the factors that have been shown to affect the retirement are the following:
Congruence between party and ideology. In recent years, as part of an “ideological rationalization” of party membership, electorally vulnerable Democrats representing conservative districts and Republicans representing liberal districts have retired at a higher rate than incumbents whose partisanship is congruent with the district’s ideology.

National partisan tides. All things being equal, members of the president’s party retire at a higher rate than members of the opposition party during the midterm election season.

Opportunities for higher office. MCs — and particularly senators — have left Congress at higher rates when the governorship of their state has opened up. The most frequent leavers are those whose governors are limited by terms limits from running again and those whose governors belong to the opposite party from them.

Scandals. Incumbents embroiled in ethical scandals leave at higher rates. The most dramatic illustration of this was the aftermath of the 1992 “House Bank Scandal.” Only 9% of House members with no bank overdrafts retired from politics in 1992, while 26% of those with over 100 overdrafts did.

Challengers

Much of what was said about the decisions of incumbents about retiring also applies to challengers and to candidates for open seats. In many cases, potential challengers and open seat candidates are also incumbent politicians in some other office, and so the decision calculus is fundamentally identical. Therefore, I will leave as an exercise to the reader the task of detailing
how to apply the previous section's discussion to candidates who might challenge an incumbent or run in an open seat following a retirement. I will confine my remarks here to the special issues attending challengers, and then to open seat candidates.

Tab. IV-4 Challengers come in all shapes and sizes. The most important feature of challengers, from the perspective of the quality of representative democracy, is whether they have a chance to defeat the incumbent. As I have already suggested, challengers who already hold some elective office tend to fare much better than those who have not. This pattern holds even in years such as 1994, when the electorate supposedly holds grudges against "professional politicians." Table IV-4 reports the percentage of challengers of both parties who were successful in 1994, breaking out the percentages according to whether the challenger had previously held elective office. Two patterns stand out in this table. First, 1994 was an extraordinarily strong Republican year, so that no Democratic challengers of any type defeated a sitting Republican House member. Second, the odds of a Republican challenger with prior elected experience beating a Democratic incumbent were more than four times greater than the odds of an inexperienced Republican challenger beating an incumbent Democrat (44% vs. 10%). Even in anti-politician years, seasoned politicians have the advantage in running for Congress against rookies.

The seminal study of the effects of "challenger quality" on congressional elections was Jacobson and Kernell's *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections*. Jacobson and Kernell were inspired to conduct their investigation into the effects of challenger quality on congressional

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32 My discussion here focuses on challengers of the opposite party from the incumbent. Incumbents are rarely seriously challenged in primaries, but when they are, the same logic I discuss here also applies.

33 *Full cite.*
elections in the wake of inconsistencies between aggregate-level election outcomes and evidence about congressional elections adduced from public opinion polls. The disjuncture between findings at these two levels were especially stark in the 1974 election.

The 1974 election represented the low-water mark for the Republican party in the twentieth century, up and down the ballot. The aggregate congressional vote for Republicans — 41% — was the lowest received by either of the two major parties in the twentieth century. As a result, Republicans only won one-third of the seats in the House (144). Political commentators attributed the Republican drubbing in 1974 to the massive unpopularity of the incumbent Republican president (Nixon) and to the related implication of the Republican party in the Watergate scandal. Yet at the same time, public opinion analysts discovered, at best, a weak relationship between how voters felt about President Nixon and how they voted in the congressional race. Nixon-haters weren’t especially anti-Republican in how they voted for Congress; Nixon-lovers weren’t especially pro-Republican. Given the enormity of the Watergate scandal, it seems intuitive that the Republican party should have suffered at the polls in 1974 because of it. Individual voters didn’t appear to tie together their hatred of the incumbent Republican president with a hatred of Republican congressional candidates. Yet, Republican candidates did poorly. What gives?

Jacobson and Kernell suggest that the answer to this question lies in the strategic calculations of Republican and Democratic elites early in 1974. By the time the 1974 general election had rolled around, the strategic calculations of incumbents and challengers had made the final outcome a virtually certainty. Early in 1974 Republicans who might seek election in November checked the political winds, found them threatening, and decided to lay low for a year
or two. At the same time, ambitious Democrats who already held some lower elective office recognized the opportunity and started running early for higher office. Thus, the worst that could have been said about many Republicans who ended up on the ballot in 1974 is that they were untried, naive, and inexperienced. They may have been, in fact, relatively untainted by scandal, since they didn’t come from political backgrounds. They were innocents, but they were also inept. Republican congressional candidates were slaughtered by the Democrats who had experience, rather than purity, on their side.

What difference does prior electoral experience make among challengers? Much of the answer to this question has already been given earlier in this chapter. Because the American political opportunity structure is pyramidal, these "quality challengers" are already proven vote-getters in their communities. Other political elites are more willing to swing support their way. Sophisticated contributors are more likely to contribute "seed money" to their campaigns. And finally, because most quality challengers must give up a relatively safe electoral career in a lower office in order to run for Congress, the very fact that such a challenger appears in a congressional race virtually guarantees that the office is ripe for the picking.

There is a tendency among some students of American politics to regard the strategic role that challengers play in the outcome of congressional elections as undermining democracy. Should not voters have the best alternatives presented to them every year, regardless of national tides or the electoral advantage built up by the incumbent over time? This is a serious question, for which there is no easy answer. A glib answer is to say that if incumbents always knew that they would face well-financed and experienced challengers, they would be more responsive to
their constituents. Thus, even if a steady succession of quality challengers never defeated a particular incumbent, at least the constant competition would keep her honest.

Yet, the glib answer overlooks important features of democratic politics. One important feature of democratic politics keeps high-quality challengers from facing off against incumbents in every election, and would likely continue to keep them away from elections even if their participation were heavily subsidized: no one can force anyone to run for office. Thus, any desire to ensure that quality challengers always face-off against incumbents is probably chimeral. Second, incumbents who knew they would have to face a steady stream of high-quality challengers into the infinite future would tend to retire earlier, thus cutting short most congressional careers. While many people consider shorter congressional careers to be an intrinsically good thing, other do not. And in any event, what this second consideration points out is that nothing would ever prohibit incumbents from choosing to retire rather than face a well-regarded challenger. Open seat elections do provide voters with even greater opportunities to change political course. Yet, when retirements increase, the number of incumbents held accountable by the voters decreases. It is not obvious that encouraging more retirements would improve the representative character of Congress.

Because the American structure of political opportunity is hierarchical, it is possible for changes in the parameters of state and local elections to affect whether quality challengers appear in congressional elections. The movement among the states to limit the terms of their state legislatures, which grew in popularity in the early 1990s, may have a second-order effect on congressional elections by dumping into the pool of potential congressional challengers a number of former state legislators who must run for higher office if they are to stay in politics. It is too
early to tell whether state legislative term limits will affect the quality of congressional challengers in those states that have them, but there will be enough forced retirements between now and the year 2000 to allow this hypothesis to be tested soon.

**Open-seat candidates**

Every two years an average of six senators and thirty House members retire from Congress, leaving their seats open. While small in number, these open seat races have in recent years provided about half the new members of Congress. Because open seat races, by definition, do not involve an incumbent, their dynamics are fundamentally different from those involving a challenger and an incumbent.

Beginning in the mid-1960s the degree of competition within most congressional districts began declining, as the measured incumbency advantage grew. A major contributor to the decline in this competition was the decline in the tendency of high-quality challengers to oppose incumbents. Yet at the same time, overall turnover in Congress did not decline so precipitously. What this means is that from the 1960s into the early 1990s, competition that once was dispersed among all congressional elections was redistributed and concentrated more and more on open seats.

**Fig. IV-3** This trend is illustrated in Figure IV-3. The upper panel of Figure IV-3 shows the average percentage by which incumbents won reelection from 1946 to 1988. Note that the trend was inexorably upward. The lower panel shows the average percentage by which the party of the incumbent won the House seat the first election in which the incumbent retired — that is, the first election when the seat became open. Note that this graph marched downward until the mid-
1960s, indicating increasing competition in open seats, and then fluctuated around a constant mean until the end of the 1980s.

Fig. IV-4 Campaign money has flowed to open seat elections in a manner consistent with the trends in competitiveness. (See Figure IV-4.) Since the federal government started keeping records, spending by incumbents has risen steadily while spending by challengers has stagnated, producing a dramatic disparity between incumbents and challengers. At the same time, spending in open seats has risen even more than spending on incumbents. Even though spending in open seat races tends to favor the candidate of the party that previously held that seat, the advantage is not nearly as great as that held by incumbents over challengers.

An open seat provides the best opportunity for the party that had previously not held a congressional seat to take it over. How successful have out-parties been in this regard? The answer is "not very," although there was a trend in the 1970s and 1980s for out-parties to do slightly better across time.

The "out" party tends to be unsuccessful in taking over seats when they become open for one important reason: the "out" party is typically the minority party in the district. This was illustrated in Figure IV-3, which reports the average vote for the party currently holding a House seat once that seat becomes open. Note that while there have been fluctuations (1966 is a particular outlier), the party that had previously held a House seat, on average, has seen its candidate to fill the vacancy in an open seat race receive about 55% of the vote. This slight edge at the polls allows parties to hold onto congressional seats, once they become vacant, about three-quarters of the time.
One factor that separates open seats from those involving an incumbent running for reelection is the primary. When the incumbent retires, the primaries become more important because they are more likely to be contested. Still, because most districts tend to lean perceptibly toward one of the two parties, it is unusual to have two strongly contested primaries whenever a congressional seat comes open. What is more common is for the district’s majority party to hold a highly contested primary, with the minority party nominee winning an uncontested or poorly contested primary (Schantz, 1980).

Because open seat congressional elections tend to be more competitive than elections with an incumbent running, many people in recent years have supported term limits as a mechanism to increase the retirement rate and thus, to increase the number of open seat elections. Having worked through the decision calculus of various types of congressional candidates, I hope you now appreciate how term limits might, or might not, increase the competitiveness of congressional elections. A naive prediction about term limits is to suppose that competition for congressional seats must increase if the number of open seats is increased by the term limits mechanism. After all, competition is currently greater for open seats than for incumbent-contested seats, why wouldn't creating more open seats just increase the level of competition even more?

The reason why simply creating more open seats through term limits will not guarantee more competition for House seats is that term limits would regularize the appearance of open seats. Right now, local political elites might try to estimate when the local member of Congress
A good example of how political careers are never certain is the machinations of Rep. Joseph Kennedy of Massachusetts. In the summer of 1997, amid much speculation that he would run for Massachusetts governor in 1998, he announced that he would stay out of the governor’s race, pleading that negative press about his family would make such an endeavor foolish. In the same press conference, Kennedy announced he would, instead, run for reelection to the House in 1998. Massachusetts political commentators took Kennedy at his word and immediately declared him invincible for reelection to his House seat. Yet, within two months of his vote to run for reelection, volatile turnover among Kennedy’s congressional staff had caught the eye of Boston political reporters, who had begun speculating about Kennedy’s eminent retirement from the House. At this writing it is too early to tell what Kennedy will actually do in 1998, but the episode does illustrate why lower-level politicians can’t let down their guard even when the incumbent MC seems unstoppable.

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could have competition against the incumbent all the time, with ambitious challengers running
against the incumbent in the hopes of avoiding the chaos of an open seat race that everyone has
been anticipating for many years.35

Thus, whether term limits would increase or decrease electoral competition for Congress
is an empirical question that depends on things such as the number of potential candidates for
Congress and their feelings about taking risks.

IV. Conclusion: The Engine of Ambition in Congressional Elections

"Ambition lies at the heart of politics" (Schlesinger 1966, p. 1). This chapter has been about the
ways in which the individual ambitions of politicians provide the energy to propel the
congressional election system forward. The universe of congressional elections revolves around
incumbents, who make up the bulk of congressional candidates and whose skills and command of
resources make them the obvious first-movers in congressional elections.

While a focus on the strategic interactions of candidates and potential candidates may
make it seem that the engine of congressional elections is isolated from the world of the voters,
nothing could be further from the truth. The actions and reactions of candidates for office are all

35Banks and Kiewiet (1989) make a similar argument in their analysis of why incumbents
almost always are challenged for reelection and why weak challengers frequently do the
challenging. Essentially, weak challengers try to avoid open seat elections, when they know that a
number of high-quality candidates are likely to enter the primaries. While opposing an incumbent
is a long-shot for a low-quality challenger, it may be a better shot than taking on a whole host of
high-quality candidates when the seat comes open. This phenomenon helps to explain why the
typical losing incumbent is a first-term member: Periodically these low-quality challengers get
lucky and win, perhaps because the incumbent was engulfed in a scandal after the candidate filing
date or because the incumbent was caught on the wrong side of partisan tides. Such a winner is
likely to be a more vulnerable incumbent in the next election, particularly against a high-quality
challenger. Hence, in the next election the formerly low-quality challenger (now the incumbent)
faces off against a high-quality challenger.
predicated on the desire to (eventually) please the most voters and win election. Having focused on the strategic interactions in a rarified stratum of American politics, it is now the time to turn our attention to the voters and understand how they react to the machinations of local political elites.
Figure IV-1. The structure of electoral advancement for Michael Harrington.
Figure IV-2

Northern Virginia’s Congressional Districts, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s
Table IV-1
Prior career of the Massachusetts delegation to the House, 91st Congress (1969-1971)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dist.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year first elected to House</th>
<th>Prior elected experience</th>
<th>Occupation immediately prior to first House election</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Silvio O. Conte</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>State senate, 1951-1958</td>
<td>Mass. State Senate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Edward P. Boland</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>State House, 1935-1940 County Register of Deeds, 1941-1952</td>
<td>County Register of Deeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Philip J. Philbin</td>
<td>1943</td>
<td>None (Significant appointive political experience)</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Harold D. Donohue</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Worcester City Council, 1925-1935</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>F. Bradford Morse</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Lowell City Council, 1952-1953</td>
<td>Deputy administrator, U.S. Veterans Administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>William H. Bates*</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>U.S. Navy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Torbert H. Macdonald</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>John W. McCormack</td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>State House, 1920-1922 State Senate, 1923-1926</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Margaret M. Heckler</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Governor's Council, 1962-1966</td>
<td>Governor's Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>James A. Burke</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>State House State Senate</td>
<td>State Senate(?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Hastings Keith</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>State Senate, 1953-1956</td>
<td>Insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sen</td>
<td>Edward M. Kennedy</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Asst. District attorney</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Bates died on October 3, 1969 and Harrington was elected to take his place.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B&lt;sub&gt;L&lt;/sub&gt; vs. B&lt;sub&gt;H&lt;/sub&gt;</th>
<th>P&lt;sub&gt;L&lt;/sub&gt; vs. P&lt;sub&gt;H&lt;/sub&gt;</th>
<th>C&lt;sub&gt;L&lt;/sub&gt; vs. C&lt;sub&gt;H&lt;/sub&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-Scope of legislative authority</td>
<td>-Party identification in the districts</td>
<td>-Opportunities foregone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Political and policy resources within the institution</td>
<td>-Partisan tides</td>
<td>-Number and quality of challengers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Pay and perquisites</td>
<td>-District changes</td>
<td>-Fundraising efficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Value in achieving even higher office</td>
<td>-Scandals</td>
<td>-Efficiency of translating money and volunteer time into votes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>Party</td>
<td>Elected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truman</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>1948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eisenhower</td>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>1952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eisenhower</td>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>1956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennedy</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>1960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>1964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nixon</td>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>1968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nixon</td>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>1972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reagan</td>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reagan</td>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Avg. 50.2 45.4 -4.9 26.0 3.6
Table IV-4
Success of high- and low-quality challengers in 1994

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democratic challengers against Republican incumbents</th>
<th>Republican challengers against Democratic incumbents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No prior office</td>
<td>Held prior office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenger won (pct.)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total challengers</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>