The Strategic Context

Congressional elections, and elections in the United States in general, are centered more on candidates than are elections in other modern industrialized democracies. Why is this the case, and how does it affect the conduct of congressional elections? In this chapter we discuss the candidate-centered U.S. election system and explain how the Constitution, election laws, and the political parties form the system's institutional framework. We also explain how the nation's political culture and recent developments in technology have helped this system flourish.

Other important topics covered involve the political setting, or context. The political setting in a given election year has a substantial influence on electoral competition and, ultimately, the potential for turnover in Congress. It includes some predictable factors, such as the decennial redrawing of House districts; some highly likely occurrences, such as the wide-scale reelection of incumbents; and transient, less predictable phenomena, such as congressional scandals, acts of nature or terrorism, and economic upheavals. The setting in a given election year or district affects the expectations and behavior of potential candidates; the individuals who actually run for Congress; the political parties, interest groups, and others that help finance campaigns; and, of course, voters.

The Candidate-Centered Campaign

In contemporary U.S. congressional elections, candidates, not political parties, are the major focus of campaigns, and candidates, not parties, bear the ultimate responsibility for election outcomes. These characteristics of congressional elections are striking when viewed from a comparative perspective. In most democracies, political parties are the principal contestants in elections, and campaigns almost always focus on national issues, ideology, and party programs and accomplishments. In the United States, parties no longer run congressional campaigns, as they did in the era of party-centered campaigns, and only rarely do parties become the main focus of elections. Instead, candidates run their own campaigns, and parties and interest groups contribute money and other resources to

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some of them. Parties and groups also may advertise or mobilize voters on behalf of candidates. A comparison of the terminology routinely used to describe elections in the United States with that used in Great Britain more than hints at the differences. In the United States, candidates are said to *run* for Congress, and they do so with or without party help. In Britain, by contrast, candidates are said to *stand* for election to Parliament, and their party runs most of the campaign. The difference in terminology only slightly oversimplifies reality.

Unlike candidates for national legislatures in most other democracies, candidates in the United States are largely self-selected rather than recruited by party organizations. Candidates must earn the right to run under their party's label by winning a participatory primary, caucus, or convention, or by scaring off all opposition. Only after they have secured their party's nomination are major-party candidates ensured a place on the general election ballot. Until then, few congressional candidates receive significant assistance from party committees, although some may get help from party members in Congress and groups allied with the candidate's party. Independent and minor-party candidates can get on the ballot in other ways—usually by paying a registration fee or collecting several thousand signatures from district residents.
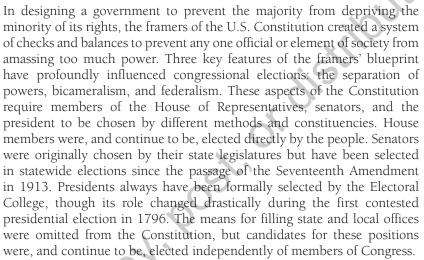
In most other countries, the nomination process begins with a small group of party activists pursuing the nomination by means of a "closed" process that allows only formal, dues-paying party members to select the candidate.[1] The American system amplifies the input of primary voters—and, in a few states, activists—who participate in caucuses or conventions, but these other systems respond more so to the input of party members and leaders in and out of government.

The need to win a party nomination forces congressional candidates to assemble their own campaign organizations, formulate their own election strategies, and conduct their own campaigns. The images and issues they convey to voters in trying to win the nomination carry over to the general election. The choices of individual candidates and their advisers have a greater impact on election outcomes than do the activities of party organizations and other groups.

The candidate-centered nature of congressional elections has evolved in recent years as political parties and interest groups, including many based in Washington, DC, have used independent media campaigns and coordinated grassroots campaigns involving sophisticated voter targeting and outreach efforts to communicate with and mobilize voters in competitive races. However, the basic structure of the system remains intact. That structure has a significant impact on virtually every aspect of campaigning, including who decides to run, the types of strategies and tactics candidates employ, and the resources available to candidates. It affects the decisions and activities of party organizations; interest groups, including political

action committees (PACs), super PACs, and other entities they use to influence elections; political activists and individual donors; and the journalists who cover electoral politics. It also has substantial effects on how citizens make their voting decisions and the activities that successful candidates perform once they are elected to Congress. Finally, the candidate-centered nature of the congressional election system affects the reforms those in power are willing to consider.

The Institutional Framework

In designing a government to prevent the majority from depriving the minority of its rights, the framers of the U.S. Constitution created a system of checks and balances to prevent any one official or element of society from amassing too much power. Three key features of the framers' blueprint have profoundly influenced congressional elections: the separation of powers, bicameralism, and federalism. These aspects of the Constitution require members of the House of Representatives, senators, and the president to be chosen by different methods and constituencies. House members were, and continue to be, elected directly by the people. Senators were originally chosen by their state legislatures but have been selected in statewide elections since the passage of the Seventeenth Amendment in 1913. Presidents always have been formally selected by the Electoral College, though its role changed drastically during the first contested presidential election in 1796. The means for filling state and local offices were omitted from the Constitution, but candidates for these positions were, and continue to be, elected independently of members of Congress.

Holding elections for individual offices separates the political fortunes of members of Congress from those of other members and other officials. A candidate for the House can win during an election year in which his or her party suffers a landslide defeat in the race for the presidency, experiences severe losses in the House or Senate, or finds itself surrendering its hold over neighboring congressional districts, the state legislature, the governor's mansion, and various local offices. The system encourages House, Senate, state, and local candidates to communicate issues and themes they perceive to be popular in their districts, even when their messages differ from those advocated by their party's leader. It does relatively little to encourage teamwork in campaigning or governance. In 2006 a considerable number of Republican candidates distanced themselves from the Republican president, George W. Bush, who had very low job approval ratings, by publicly opposing the core of his legislative agenda. In both 2010 and 2014, Democratic President Barack Obama witnessed some of his party's congressional candidates exhibit similar behavior on the campaign trail. The same was true of President Donald Trump in 2018. Trump's low

public approval ratings, as well as some Republicans' disagreement with his positions on immigration and other policies, concerns about his confrontational leadership style, and disgust with his personal behavior, led some members of the party to break ranks with the president. Among them was two-term representative Carlos Curbelo (R-FL), who criticized Trump for using "a divide and conquer strategy" harmful to American democracy.[2]

Such opposition would be considered unacceptable under a parliamentary system of government, with its party-focused elections, but it is entirely consistent with the expectations of the Constitution's framers. As James Madison wrote in *Federalist* no. 46,

> A local spirit will infallibly prevail . . . in the members of Congress. . . . Measures will too often be decided according to their probable effect, not on the national prosperity and happiness, but on the prejudices, interests, and pursuits of the governments and people of the individual States.

When congressional candidates differ from their party's presidential nominee or national platform on major issues, they seek political cover not only from the Constitution but also from state party platforms, local election manifestos, or fellow party members with whom they share issue positions.

Of course, congressional candidates usually adopt national issue positions held by other party candidates for the House, Senate, or presidency. In 1932 most Democrats embraced Franklin D. Roosevelt's call for an activist government to battle the Great Depression. In 2010 and 2014, most Republican candidates embraced a national anti-Obama, antigovernment message that focused on rising unemployment, lost retirement savings, falling home prices, corporate bailouts, and dissatisfaction with the Affordable Care Act. Most Democratic incumbents responded by directing voters' attention to local issues and their own records. Similarly, large numbers of Democratic challengers and open-seat candidates distanced themselves from Obama. In 2018, the shoe was on the other foot. Public disapproval of Trump and the performance of the federal government, combined with discomfort over the president's remarks about women and minorities as well as his policies on health care, immigration, and other issues, encouraged many Republican politicians to try to direct voters' attention to local concerns.

Federal and state laws further contribute to the candidate-centered nature of elections. Originally, federal law regulated few aspects of congressional elections, designating only the number of representatives a state was entitled to elect. States held congressional elections at different times, used different methods of election, and set different qualifications for voters. Some states used multimember at-large districts, a practice that awarded each party a share of congressional seats proportional to its share of the state-wide popular vote; others elected their House members in odd-numbered

years, which minimized the ability of presidential candidates to pull House candidates of their own party into office on their coattails. The financing of congressional campaigns also went virtually unregulated for most of the nation's history.

Over the years, Congress and the states passed legislation governing the election of House members that further reinforced the candidate-centered nature of congressional elections at the expense of parties. The creation of geographically defined, single-member, winner-take-all districts was particularly important in this regard. These districts, mandated by the Apportionment Act of 1842, made it necessary for individual candidates to build locally based electoral coalitions. Such districts give no rewards to candidates who have come in second, even if their party has performed well throughout the state or in neighboring districts.[3] Thus, candidates belonging to the same party have little incentive to work together or to run a party-focused campaign. Under the multimember district or general ticket systems that existed in some states prior to the act—and that continue to be used in most of Western Europe—members of parties that finish lower than first place may receive seats in the legislature. Candidates have strong incentives to run cooperative, party-focused campaigns under these systems because their electoral fortunes are bound together.

The timing of congressional elections also helps to produce a candidate-centered system. Because the dates are fixed, with House elections scheduled biennially and roughly one-third of the Senate up for election every two years, many elections are held when there is no burning issue on the national agenda. If an election cycle occurs when there are few salient national issues to capture voters' attention, House and Senate candidates base their campaigns on local issues or their qualifications for holding office. In an election where national concerns exert a greater impact on voters than local considerations, as has been the case in many recent elections, virtually all candidates must confront the broader national agenda.[4] Nevertheless, even in these nationalized elections the outcomes of most congressional races revolve around the qualifications of the candidates and the quality of their campaigns.

In contrast, systems that do not have fixed election dates, including most in Europe, tend to hold elections that are more national in focus and centered on political parties. The rules regulating national elections in these systems require that elections be held within a set time frame, but the exact date is left open. Elections may be called by the party in power at a time of relative prosperity and when its leaders are confident they can maintain or enlarge their parliamentary majority. Elections also may be called when a critical problem divides the nation and the party in power is forced to call a snap election because its members in parliament are unable to agree on a policy for dealing with the crisis. Compared to congressional elections, which are often referenda on the performance of individual

officeholders and their abilities to handle local concerns, these elections focus almost exclusively on national conditions and the performance of the party in power.

Because the boundaries of congressional districts rarely match those of statewide or local offices, and because terms for the House, the Senate, and many state and local offices differ from one another, a party's candidates often lack incentives to work together. House candidates consider the performance of their party's candidates statewide or in neighboring districts to be a secondary concern, just as the election of House candidates is usually not of primary importance to candidates for state or local office. In some realms of campaigning, such as fundraising, recruiting volunteers, and attracting news coverage, members of the same party compete for limited resources. Differences in election boundaries and timing also encourage a sense of parochialism in party officials similar to that of their candidates. Cooperation among party organizations can be achieved only by persuading local, state, and national party leaders that it is in their mutual best interest. Cooperation is often heightened during presidential election years, when the presidential contest dominates the political agenda and boosts voter turnout. Elections that precede or follow the census also are characterized by increased cooperation because politicians at many levels of government focus on the imminent redrawing of election districts or on preserving or wresting control of new districts or those that have been significantly altered.

Although the seeds for candidate-centered congressional election campaigns were sown by the Constitution and election laws, not until the middle of the 20th century did the candidate-centered system firmly take root. Prior to the emergence of this system, during a period often called the "golden age" of political parties, party organizations played a major role in most election campaigns, including many campaigns for Congress. Local party organizations, often referred to as "old-fashioned political machines," had control over the nomination process, possessed a near-monopoly over the resources needed to organize the electorate, and provided the symbolic cues that informed the election decisions of most voters. The key to their success was their ability to command the loyalties of large numbers of individuals, many of whom were able to persuade friends and neighbors to support their party's candidates. Not until the demise of the old-fashioned machine and the introduction of new campaign technology did the modern, candidate-centered system finally blossom.[5]

Reforms intended to weaken political machines accelerated the development of the candidate-centered system. One such reform was the Australian ballot, adopted by roughly three-quarters of the states between 1888 and 1896.[6] This government-printed ballot listed every candidate for each office and enabled individuals to cast their votes in secret, away from the prying eyes of party officials. The Australian ballot replaced a system of

voting in which each party supplied supporters with its own easily identifiable ballot that included only the names of the party's candidates. By ensuring secrecy and simplifying split-ticket voting, the Australian ballot made it easy for citizens to focus on candidates rather than parties when voting. This type of ballot remains in use today.

State-regulated primary nominating contests, which were widely adopted during the Progressive movement of the early 1900s, deprived party leaders of the power to handpick congressional nominees and gave that power to voters who participated in their party's nominating election.[7] The merit-based civil service system, another progressive reform, divested the parties of patronage. No longer able to distribute government jobs or contracts, the parties had difficulty maintaining large corps of campaign workers.[8] Issues, friendships, the excitement of politics, and other noneconomic incentives could motivate small numbers of people to become active in party politics, but they could not galvanize enough people to support a party-focused system of congressional elections.

Congressional candidates also lacked the patronage or government contracts needed to attract large numbers of volunteer workers or persuade other candidates to assist them with their campaigns. By the mid-20th century, the "isolation" of congressional candidates was so complete that a major report on the state of political parties characterized congressional candidates as the "orphans of the political system." The report, published by the American Political Science Association's Committee on Political Parties, went on to point out that congressional candidates "had no truly adequate party mechanism available for the conduct of their campaigns[,] . . . enjoy[ed] remarkably little national or local support, [and were] mostly . . . left to cope with the political hazards of their occupation on their own."[9]

Voter registration drives, get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts, and redistricting were about the only areas of election politics in which there was much cooperation among groups of candidates and party committees. But even here, the integration of different party committees and candidate organizations—especially those involved in congressional elections—was and still is less than that exhibited in other democracies.

The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (BCRA), the Federal Election Campaign Acts that preceded it, and the regulatory rulings and court verdicts that have shaped federal campaign finance law have further reinforced the pattern of candidate-centered congressional elections. Federal law places strict limits on the amounts of money party committees can contribute to or spend in coordination with their congressional candidates' campaigns (see Tables 1-1 and 1-2). It does allow parties to make unlimited independent expenditures *expressly* advocating the election or defeat of a candidate, but these must be made without the knowledge or consent of the candidate or anyone involved with the candidate's campaign, including consultants or party staff who are directly assisting the candidate.

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spending and increase their political clout. As a result, interest groups are estimated to have spent $1.3 billion during the 2018 congressional elections.[17] Some of this spending took the form of cash contributions and campaign services delivered to candidates; contributions and transfers to party committees and other election-oriented groups; television, direct-mail, radio, Internet, social media, and other communications designed to persuade or mobilize voters; polling and other political research; and the employment of campaign consultants and other staff. It included an estimated $126.7 million spent by super PACs and other outside spending groups created for the sole purpose of advancing the career of a single congressional candidate.[18] The sheer number of interest group organizations and the amounts they spend on congressional elections amply demonstrate that candidates can and do turn to sources besides party organizations for support.

The evolution of campaign finance law has created an environment that includes huge numbers of organizational and individual donors, but it has not fully ushered political parties to the periphery of congressional campaigns. Rather, party committees based in Washington, DC, have adapted to the contemporary national economy of campaign finance. The individuals, PACs, and other organizations that are suppliers of campaign funds in this economy are primarily located in and around Washington, New York City, Los Angeles, and the nation's other wealthy population centers. The funds' recipients are candidates contesting House and Senate seats located across the country. They include most incumbents and a relatively small group of nonincumbents in close races. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, the parties have responded to the nationalization of the campaign finance system by becoming the major brokers or mediators between the financiers of congressional elections and the candidates who compete in them. In many cases, the relationships between party committees and the candidates, individuals, and groups that spend money on elections are so strong that it is appropriate to consider these donors party-connected committees or party allies.[19]

Political Culture

Historically, U.S. political culture has supported a system of candidate-centered elections in many ways, but its major influence stems from its lack of foundation for a party-focused alternative. Americans have traditionally held a jaundiced view of political parties. *Federalist* no. 10 and George Washington's farewell address are evidence that the framers of the Constitution and the first president thought a multitude

of overlapping, wide-ranging interests were preferable to class-based divisions represented by ideological parties. The founders designed the political system to encourage pragmatism and compromise in politics and thus to mitigate the harmful effects of factions. Although the visions of democracy championed by the framers and the nation's first president have not been fully realized, they have found expression in candidate-centered campaigns.

Congressional elections test candidates' abilities to build coalitions of voters and elites from a diverse citizenry. The multiplicity of overlapping interests, lack of a feudal legacy, and relatively fluid social and economic structure in the United States discourage the formation of class-based parties like those that have developed in most other democracies.[20] The consensus among Americans for liberty, equality, and property rights and their near-universal support of the political system further undermine the development of parties aimed at promoting major political, social, or economic upheaval.[21]

Americans' traditional ambivalence about political parties is most evident during reform periods. The Populist movement of the 1890s, the Progressive movement that came shortly after, and the rise of the New Left in the 1960s all resulted in political change that weakened the parties. Reformers at the turn of the 20th century championed the Australian ballot, the direct primary, and civil service laws for the explicit purpose of taking power away from party bosses.[22] Similarly, the reform movement that took hold of the Democratic Party during the 1960s and 1970s opened party conventions, meetings, and leadership positions to the increased participation of previously underrepresented groups. The reforms, many of which were adopted by Republican as well as Democratic state party organizations, made both parties more permeable and responsive to pressures from grassroots activists. They increased the influence of candidates, their supporters, and issue activists over party affairs, including nominations, at the expense of traditional party leaders.[23] The impact of local grassroots activists on nomination politics was showcased by the Tea Party movement's role in defeating several establishment Republican primary candidates since its emergence in 2010 and the #MeToo movement's impact on many Democratic primaries in 2018, including two in which a woman wrested the nomination from a long-serving male incumbent.

Post–World War II social and cultural transformations also weakened the parties. Declining immigration and increased geographic mobility eroded the working-class ethnic neighborhoods that were a major source of party loyalists. Increased education levels encouraged citizens to rely more on their own judgment and less on local party leaders in political matters.

The development of the mass media gave voters less biased sources of information than the partisan press. The growth of interest groups, including PACs and other forms of functional and ideological representation, created new arenas for political participation and new sources of political cues.[24] The aging of the parties, generational replacement, and the emergence of new issues that cut across existing fault lines led to the decline of party affiliation among voters and to more issue-oriented voting.[25] These developments encouraged voters to rely less on local party officials and opinion leaders for political information. Cultural transformations created a void in electoral politics that individual candidates and their organizations eventually filled.

Voters' current attitudes toward the parties echo the nation's historical experience. Survey research shows that most citizens believe parties "do more to confuse the issues than to provide a clear choice on the issues" and "create conflict where none exists." Half of the population believes that parties make the political system less efficient and that "it would be better if, in all elections, we put no party labels on the ballot."[26]

Negative attitudes toward the parties are often learned at an early age. Many schoolchildren are routinely instructed to "vote for the best candidate, not the party." This lesson appears to stay with some into adulthood. Typically, less than 10 percent of all registered voters maintain that the candidate's political party is the biggest factor in their vote decision. Candidates and issues rank higher.[27]

Although American history and culture extol the virtues of political independence and candidate-oriented voting, the electoral behavior of citizens reveals powerful elements of partisanship in congressional elections. According to the Gallup Poll, fewer than 60 percent of all American adults reported they identified with either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party in November 2018.[28] The lack of support is likely the result of increasingly high levels of distrust and frustration with the government and the two major parties. However, when independents who indicate they lean toward the Democrats or the Republicans are added to the mix, the number of individuals who hold attitudes and exhibit political behaviors in a partisan manner approaches 90 percent.[29] Moreover, even though few registered voters actually admit to selecting candidates chiefly on a partisan basis, better than 9 of 10 voted for congressional candidates along party lines.[30] Such high levels of partisan voting are common in modern American politics, and party identification is among the best predictors of voting behavior in congressional elections. Yet the degree of partisanship that exists in the contemporary United States is still not strong enough to encourage a return to straight-ticket voting or foster the development of a party-focused election system.

Campaign Technology

Political campaigns are designed to communicate ideas and images that motivate voters to cast their ballots for particular candidates. Some voters are well informed; have strong opinions about candidates, issues, and parties; and will vote without ever coming into contact with a political campaign. Others will never bother to vote, regardless of politicians' efforts. Many voters need to be familiarized with the candidates and the issues to become excited enough to participate in an election. Communication is central to democratic elections, and those who are able to control the flow of information have enormous power. Candidates' campaign organizations, parties, and other groups use a variety of technologies to affect the flow of campaign information and win votes.

Person-to-person contact is one of the oldest and most effective approaches to winning votes. Nothing was or is more effective than a candidate, or a candidate's supporters, directly asking citizens for their votes. During the golden age of parties, local party volunteers assessed the needs of voters in their neighborhoods and delivered the message that, if elected, their party's candidates would help voters improve their situations.[31] Once these organizations lost control over the flow of political information, they became less important, and candidate-assembled campaign organizations became more relevant in elections.

The dawning of the television age and the development of modern campaign technology helped solidify the system of candidate-centered elections.[32] Television and radio, printing presses, public opinion polls, personal computers, the Internet and social media, and sophisticated targeting techniques are well suited to candidate-centered campaign organizations because they, and the services of the political consultants who have mastered them, are readily available for hire. Congressional candidates can assemble organizations that meet their specific needs without having to turn to party organizations for assistance, although many candidates request help from their party and from interest groups.

Technology has encouraged a major change in the focus of most congressional election campaigns. It enables campaigns to communicate more information about candidates' personalities, issue positions, and qualifications for office. As a result, little campaign activity is now devoted to party-based appeals. Radio and television were especially important in bringing about this change, because both are very effective for conveying images and less so for providing information about abstract concepts, such as partisan ideologies. The Internet reinforces the focus on candidate-centered appeals because websites enable candidates to post as many pictures, streaming video ads, and other types of material as they wish. Websites enable voters to access this content whenever they want and make it easy for voters

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to contact or contribute to a campaign. Social media, including Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat, allow campaigns to disseminate news about candidates and issues in a rapid and cost-effective manner. These platforms are routinely used to distribute snippets of information that encourage young, and some not-so-young, voters to visit their websites.[33] Facebook also allows campaigns—as well as other groups and individuals—to disseminate news about candidates and issues and enables users to disclose and promote their political views and candidate preferences to their personal social networks. Some sites also let voters who support the same candidate directly contact each other. Because these media allow for direct candidate-to-voter, voter-to-candidate, and voter-to-voter communication, their overall effect, like that of the electronic mass media more generally, is to direct attention away from the parties and toward candidates.

New methods of voter targeting also have had an impact on congressional campaigns. The use of consumer information, which can include everything from the types of cars people drive to the pets they own and the websites they visit, has created a demand for professionals with the skills to create complex models for predicting voting behavior. The introduction of new voting methods has had a similar impact. By the 2018 election, 34 states and the District of Columbia provided some form of early voting, including 28 that permitted no-excuse absentee voting and 3 that switched to all-mail balloting (Oregon, Colorado, and Washington), wherein all registered voters are automatically mailed a ballot and voting is conducted exclusively by mail.[34] "Election Day" in these states can last more than a month, encouraging candidates to hire database and targeting experts to continually monitor voter lists and adjust the tactics used to mobilize supporters who have yet to vote.

Changes in electioneering have resulted in local party activists becoming less important in congressional elections. An increased reliance on political consultants has diminished the value of semiskilled and unskilled volunteers—although a well-run campaign harnesses the contributions of both. Skyrocketing campaign costs, the emergence of a national economy of campaign finance, and the rise of a cadre of fundraising specialists with the skills, contacts, and technology to raise money from individuals and PACs have further increased the candidate-centered character of election campaigns because they provided politicians with the means for raising the contributions needed to purchase the services of political consultants.

Changes in technology transformed most congressional campaigns from labor-intensive grassroots undertakings, at which local party committees excelled, to money-driven, political marketing efforts requiring the services of skilled experts. Most local party committees have not adapted to the new style of campaign politics.[35] Initially, party committees in Washington, DC, and in many states were unprepared to play a significant role in congressional elections. However, the parties' national, congressional, and

senatorial campaign committees and many state party organizations proved adept at making the transition to the new style of politics. They began to take on meaningful roles in congressional election campaigns during the late 1970s and early 1980s and continue to do so in the 21st century.[36]

The Political Setting

Candidates, campaign managers, party officials, interest group leaders, and others active in elections consider more than the institutional framework, the culturally and historically conditioned expectations of voters, and available technology when planning and executing electoral strategies. Individuals connected to a campaign also assess the political atmosphere, including the circumstances in their district, their state, and the nation as a whole. At the local level, important considerations include the intentions of the incumbent and other potential candidates and the partisan history of the seat. Relevant national-level factors include whether it is a presidential or midterm election year, the state of the economy, the president's popularity, international affairs, and the public's attitudes toward the federal government.

Of course, one's perspective on the limits and possibilities associated with the political environment depends largely on one's vantage point. Although incumbents talk about the competition and are, indeed, wary of it, these officeholders—particularly House members—operate in a political context that works largely to their benefit. As explained in later chapters, incumbents enjoy significant levels of name recognition and voter support, are able to assemble superior campaign organizations, and can draw on their experience in office to speak knowledgeably about issues and claim credit for the federally financed programs and improvements in their state or district. Incumbents also tend to get favorable treatment from the media. Moreover, most can rely on loyal followers from previous campaigns for continued backing: Supporters at home tend to vote repeatedly for incumbents, and supporters in Washington and the nation's other wealthy cities routinely give incumbents campaign contributions.

Things look different from the typical challenger's vantage point. Most challengers, particularly those with some political experience, recognize that the deck is stacked against someone who sets out to defeat an incumbent. Little in the setting in which most congressional campaigns take place favors the challenger. Most challengers lack the public visibility, money, and political experience to wage a strong campaign. Moreover, because those who work in and help finance campaigns recognize the long odds against challengers, they usually see little benefit in helping them. As a result, high incumbent success rates have become a self-fulfilling prophecy. House incumbents enjoyed an overall reelection rate of better than 90 percent between 1950 and 2008; Senate reelection rates averaged more than 80 percent. Even

during the nationalized elections of 1994 and 2006, more than 90 percent of all House members and 85 percent of all senators who sought to remain in office were able to do so. The 2010 congressional elections, which broke a record set in 1938 for the largest net increase in House seats for a single party and which witnessed the defeat of 58 sitting House members, still resulted in a reelection rate of about 85 percent. The reelection rate for senators that year was 84 percent. Given their limited prospects for success in contesting a congressional seat, before running for office most experienced politicians wait until an incumbent retires, runs for another office, or dies. Indeed, substantial numbers of incumbents, especially in the House, are reelected without opposition or with weak opposition at best.

Most elections for open seats are very competitive. They attract extremely qualified candidates who put together strong campaign organizations, raise huge amounts of money, and run lively campaigns. Even House candidates of one party who campaign for a seat that has been held by the other party for decades can often attract substantial resources, media attention, and votes. In more than a few instances, they go on to win.

Many explanations exist for the relative lack of competition in House elections. Some districts are so dominated by one party that few individuals of the other party are willing to commit the time, energy, or money to running for office. One-party dominance is often the result of the "sorting" of the population into like-minded communities, as conservatives choose to live in neighborhoods largely populated by others who share their lifestyles and values, and liberals settle in areas with other liberals.[37] The tradition of one-party dominance is so strong that virtually all the talented, politically ambitious individuals living in an area join the dominant party. When an incumbent in one of these districts faces a strong challenge, it usually takes place in the primary, and the winner is all but guaranteed success in the general election.

Uncompetitive House districts also may result from a highly political redistricting process. In states where one party controls both the governorship and the state legislature, partisan gerrymandering is often used to maximize the number of House seats the dominant party can win. In states where each party controls at least some portion of the state government, compromises are frequently made to design districts that protect congressional incumbents. Party officials and political consultants armed with computers, election histories, and demographic and other voter information can "pack" and "crack" voting blocs to promote either of these goals.[38] The result is that large numbers of congressional districts are designed to be uncompetitive. The postredistricting election held in California in 2002 exemplifies this: Only three of the state's 53 House elections were decided by a margin of less than 20 points. This is in sharp contrast with the 24 California House seats decided by that same margin in 2012, which took place after a new redistricting commission and its top-two nonpartisan primary system were introduced. Higher rates of competitiveness are typical

of the relatively few states that use commissions for redistricting, because commissions generally place less emphasis on partisanship and incumbency.

Elections that immediately follow redistricting traditionally have been marked by a temporary increase in competition. The creation of new House seats and the redrawing of others typically results in increased numbers of incumbent defeats in both the primaries and the general election. The pitting of incumbents against each other almost always accounts for some of these losses, as does the fact that the prospect of newly drawn seats often encourages a surge in congressional retirements and in more candidates than usual challenging sitting House members. As a result, the decennial reapportionment and redistricting of House seats has routinely produced a 10-year, five-election cycle of political competition.

Another cyclical element of the national political setting that can influence congressional elections is the presence or absence of a presidential race. Presidential elections have higher levels of voter turnout than midterm elections, and the voters who go to the polls in midterms are generally older, better educated, and less likely to be members of racial or ethnic minorities. Turnout in midterm elections typically hovers around 40 percent, but it fluctuates. The turnout rate was a mere 36.7 percent of eligible voters in 2014, the lowest since 1942, and then buoyed to about 50.3 percent of eligible voters in 2018—the highest since 1914.[39]

Presidential elections also have the potential for coattail effects. A presidential candidate's popularity can become infectious and lead to increased support for the party's congressional contestants. A party that enjoys much success in electing congressional candidates during a presidential election year is, of course, likely to lose some of those seats in the midterm election that follows, especially when that party also controls both chambers of Congress.[40] An unpopular president can further drag down a party's congressional contestants.[41] Presidential election politics had a strong impact on the election of 1932, in which the Democrats gained 90 seats in the House and 13 seats in the Senate. The Democratic congressional landslide was a sign of widespread support for the Democratic presidential candidate, Franklin D. Roosevelt, as well as a repudiation of the incumbent president, Herbert Hoover, and his policies for dealing with the Great Depression. Presidential coattail effects have declined since the 1930s, and Bill Clinton's and George W. Bush's presidential elections were conspicuous for their lack of them.[42] Of course, one cannot expect a presidential candidate's coattails to be long when a victory comes in at less than 50 percent of the popular vote, as was the case with Clinton in 1992 and 1996 and Bush in 2000. Barack Obama's decisive victory in 2008 had a somewhat larger impact, increasing the number of Democrats in the House by 21 and in the Senate by 8, but his 2012 campaign had minimal effects, boosting his party's margin by a mere 8 House seats and 2 Senate seats. More recently, the Republicans lost 6 House and 2 Senate seats in 2016, when Donald Trump captured the White House without a popular majority.

Congressional candidates who belong to the same party as an unpopular president also run the risk of being blamed for the failures of their party's chief executive during midterm elections. Unable to vote against the president in a midterm election, voters who are unhappy with the president's performance or the nation's direction under his leadership may vote against a congressional candidate who belongs to the same party.[43] The president's party has historically lost congressional seats in midterm elections when economic trends are unfavorable, although the relationship between economic performance and congressional turnover has weakened in recent years.[44] The Republicans' 1974 loss of 49 seats in the House and 4 in the Senate is an example of a midterm election that was largely a referendum, in this case on the roles of President Richard Nixon and members of his administration in the break-in at Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate Hotel during the 1972 presidential campaign and the decision of Nixon's successor, President Gerald Ford, to pardon Nixon.[45] Another example is the Democrats' loss of 52 seats in the House and 8 seats in the Senate in 1994, which was caused largely by voter animosity toward Clinton, dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party's failure to enact health care reform or a middle-class tax cut, and the Republicans' successful portrayal of the White House and the Democratic-controlled Congress as corrupt and out of step with the views of most voters. The 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2018 midterm elections also exemplify how voter discontent with presidential leadership and the performance of the federal government can lay the groundwork for a president's party to lose substantial numbers of seats in Congress. Of course, some of the blame for these outcomes lies at the feet of members of Congress. When the president's party controls the House, the Senate, or both chambers and party members embrace the president's initiatives, they may contribute to their own political demise.

A variety of national issues can affect congressional elections. Civil rights, the women's liberation movement, the Vietnam War, the emergence of the hippie counterculture, and the protests those events spawned influenced voting during the 1960s and 1970s.[46] The wars on terrorism and in Afghanistan probably cost the Democrats seats in 2002 and 2004. The war in Iraq, the poor federal government response to Hurricane Katrina, and a crashing economy contributed to the losses of some Republicans in 2006 and 2008, just as a sputtering economy and dissatisfaction with the Affordable Care Act led to the defeat of large numbers of Democrats in 2010 and 2014. Political scandal, and the widespread distrust of government that usually follows, can lead to the defeat of politicians accused of committing ethical transgressions. Individual members of Congress who are not directly implicated in scandal also can suffer at the polls, as the 1974, 1994, and other recent elections demonstrate. As a general rule, Americans tend to be less concerned with "guns" than with "butter," so international events generally have less effect on elections than domestic conditions.

Recent congressional election cycles can be divided into two types. The first, sometimes referred to as "status quo," "localized," or "normal" elections, are characterized by contests that focus primarily on the abilities, experiences, and public service records of the candidates and on issues of major concern to local voters. Because of the many advantages incumbents enjoy over challengers, an overwhelming number of those who seek reelection in status quo election cycles win.

The second type of election cycle, often referred to as a "nationalized" or "wave" election, is one in which national political, economic, or social forces create an environment that strongly favors one party—usually the party out of power—and result in a sea change in the partisan composition of Congress and other elective institutions. An election that is nationalized in one party's favor leads to greater enthusiasm and participation by the party's contributors, activists, and electoral base, thereby increasing the support that party and its candidates are able to attract. It also increases the level of support congressional and other candidates receive from the independent or swing voters whose backing is often the key to victory in marginal districts.

The ability to campaign on the same, or very similar, issues greatly benefits candidates who belong to the favored party in a nationalized election. When local and national issues dovetail, candidates whose communications are consistent with those of their party and its interest group and media allies find it easier to break through the cacophony of voices heard in competitive elections. This is especially beneficial to congressional challengers, who are at a disadvantage in getting their message heard by voters. Nationalized elections result in virtually all of the favored party's incumbents successfully defending their seats, an unusually large number of its challengers getting elected, and the success of most of its open-seat candidates.

Incumbents' desire to protect their political careers has led them to modify Congress in ways that discourage electoral competition and help insulate them against the possibility of being washed out in a political tide. Free mailings, unlimited long-distance telephone calls, email, websites, district offices, social media, and travel help members gain visibility among their constituents. Federal pork-barrel projects, designed to benefit one or a few congressional districts, help incumbents win the support of voters.[47] Legislative aides write speeches, respond to constituent mail, resolve constituents' problems with executive branch agencies, and follow the comings and goings in their boss's district.[48] Congressional hearings provide incumbents with forums in which to address issues of concern to their constituents and attract media coverage. These perquisites of office discourage experienced politicians who could put forth a competitive challenge from running against an incumbent and give incumbents enormous advantages over those who choose to oppose them. The resources that Congress puts at its members' disposal not only increase the members' odds of reelection but also can be useful in pursuing higher office.

The dynamics of campaign finance have similar effects. Incumbency brings huge fundraising benefits, especially among PACs and wealthy individual donors. Members of Congress capitalize on them by hosting and attending fundraising events and meeting with and calling donors in their districts, in Washington, and in other wealthy areas. Devoting so much time to soliciting contributions is part of a reelection strategy that involves building up a large war chest to discourage potential challengers. With the exception of millionaires and celebrities, most challengers who decide to contest a race against a member of the House or Senate find they are unable to raise the funds needed to carry out a viable campaign.

Because the cards tend to be stacked so heavily in favor of congressional incumbents, most electoral competition takes place in open-seat elections. Open-seat contests draw more primary contestants than incumbent-challenger races. They also attract more notice from party committees and interest groups. Special elections are open-seat contests that occur between normal election cycles and after a seat becomes vacant because of an incumbent's resignation or death. These attract tremendous attention among political elites. They draw even larger numbers of primary contenders than normal open-seat elections and are characterized by high spending, especially when the seat that has become vacant was formerly held by a longtime incumbent. Alas, low turnout means they are often decided by a small, unrepresentative group of voters.

Recent Congressional Elections

The political settings that have shaped the opportunities presented to politicians, parties, interest groups, and ultimately voters since the early 1990s have some important similarities. Many elections took place under divided government, which made it difficult to ascribe credit or blame to only one party for the government's performance or the nation's affairs. Most of them occurred under the shadow of a weak economy and were haunted by the specter of huge budget deficits. This thrust concerns about jobs, housing, health care, and the country's economic future onto the political agenda.

Civil rights and racial and gender discrimination have been important campaign issues for decades as a result of the highly publicized studies of the unequal salaries and advancement prospects for women and African Americans. They were especially salient in 2018 as a result of the growing strength of the Black Lives Matter movement—decrying racial profiling, inequality in the criminal justice system, and police brutality toward African Americans—and the #MeToo movement that grew out of allegations of sexual harassment and misconduct levied against some titans of the entertainment industry and prominent politicians, including Trump and some long-serving members of Congress. Abortion rights, an

important issue on the political agenda for decades, rose in prominence in reaction to the nomination of social conservative judge Brett Kavanaugh to the U.S. Supreme Court. The sexual harassment charges Christine Blasey Ford raised during Kavanaugh's confirmation hearings in the U.S. Senate raised to new heights differences of opinion on many gender-based issues. Gay rights remained part of the campaign dialogue in 2018, partly in response to the mass shooting that killed 49 people at an Orlando, Florida, night club with a largely gay clientele, and partly because record numbers of openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, or asexual (LGBTQIA) candidates ran for—and won—seats in Congress.

Two other areas in which civil rights remain entangled with the politics of congressional elections are redistricting and election administration. In 1986 the Supreme Court ruled that any gerrymandering of a congressional district that purposely diluted minority strength was illegal under the 1982 Voting Rights Act.[49] Most states interpreted the ruling cautiously, redrawing many districts with the explicit purpose of giving one or more minority group members better-than-even chances of being elected to the House. However, redistricting rarely proceeds without contention. Scores of lawsuits are typically filed immediately after new district lines are drawn, and some are filed after several elections have been held in newly drawn districts, including in 2018 when both North Carolina and Pennsylvania were forced to reconfigure some House districts. Similarly, the introduction of early and no-excuse absentee voting, voter identification requirements, and other changes in election administration have resulted in court cases, including during the period leading up to the 2018 midterms.

Dissatisfaction with the political establishment in Washington also has occupied a prominent position on the political agenda since the onset of the 21st century. Economic downturns, immigration, homeland security, pollution and environmental regulations, health care, public schools, gun control, and myriad other seemingly intractable issues have resulted in voter frustration with national politicians. Much of this hostility has been directed toward Congress, and incumbents typically have responded with the time-tested strategy of running for reelection by campaigning against Congress itself.[50]

Political scandal and the anti-Washington mood gave congressional challengers and open-seat candidates powerful issues to use during the elections held in the early 1990s through 2018. Support for the national legislature plummeted in 1994, when less than one-fourth of all Americans approved of Congress's performance, then fell to single digits before rebounding to the high teens before the 2018 election.[51] Not surprisingly, members of the congressional majority pay a higher price for public disapproval of Congress than those in the minority, especially when a member of their party occupies the White House.[52]

The first of several recent nationalized elections, held in 1994, was characterized by widespread hostility toward the Democratic-controlled

Congress and President Clinton and by a robust anti-Washington campaign featuring the House Republicans' *Contract With America*. Led by Newt Gingrich (R-GA), this campaign energized Republican voters, demoralized Democrats, and resulted in the GOP winning control of both chambers of Congress for the first time in 42 years. The three ensuing elections are best described as status quo elections. Most Americans were benefiting from rising incomes, low inflation, a booming stock market, and other aspects of a strong economy.[53] The environment favored neither party. Rather, it benefited incumbents in general, few of whom were defeated.

The stage was set for the 2002 election to resemble a typical status quo election. The political environment favored incumbents of both parties. Public approval of Congress was relatively high, a favorable omen for members of the House and Senate seeking reelection. Republican victories in state legislative and gubernatorial races forced politicians in many states to make bipartisan compromises when redrawing House seats. Most of the agreements reached were typical in that they involved protecting sitting incumbents. Nonetheless, the attacks of September 11, 2001, drastically altered the political landscape and led to a nationalized agenda that favored the Republicans. National security and the war on terrorism, powerful Republican-owned issues that previously had barely registered among the public, rose to prominence in national opinion polls. The president's approval ratings skyrocketed, as has historically occurred when the United States has become involved in an international crisis. President George W. Bush capitalized on the situation by helping Republican congressional candidates raise money, making public appearances on their behalf, and linking their success to winning the war on terrorism.[54] Most Democrats responded by running on local issues and claiming that they, too, were tough on defense. Nevertheless, the GOP overcame the historical trend of the president's party losing seats in midterm elections and enjoyed a net gain of eight House and two Senate seats.

The 2004 election was a typical status quo election. Although issues pertaining to national security, the war in Iraq, and foreign policy in general were important, local factors were more significant than in the previous election. Few incumbents of either party were defeated. The Republicans gained a mere three seats in the House and four seats in the Senate.

The 2006 election took place in a national political environment that favored the Democrats. Growing numbers of military fatalities and limited progress in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan led to voter dissatisfaction. The inadequacy of the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina, failure to enact an immigration policy, an unpopular GOP-sponsored prescription drug reform, and growing economic insecurities further contributed to voter discontent. Scandals involving convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff, Republican House majority leader Tom DeLay of Texas, and other GOP lawmakers enraged many voters, as did a cover-up of sexually

suggestive emails and instant messages sent by then representative Mark Foley (R-FL) to some former House pages. Moreover, President George W. Bush's popularity fell drastically from its post-September 11 heights. In a classic response, most Republicans campaigned on their records and local concerns. The Democrats, on the other hand, sought to make the election a referendum on the GOP's performance. They condemned the Republicans for the state of affairs and used health care reform, energy independence, improved jobs and wages, and other domestic issues to appeal to middle- and working-class Americans. The Democrats also used their Red to Blue program to take the then unusual step of using party resources to expand the field of competition. Their efforts were highly successful. In 2006 the Democratic Party enjoyed a net gain of 31 seats in the House and 6 seats in the Senate and won control of both chambers.[55]

The political environment in 2008 bore many similarities to that of 2006, but Republicans also had to contend with blame for the massive economic downturn that began under President Bush's watch and the lackluster campaign of their party's presidential nominee, Senator John McCain of Arizona. Predictably, Republican congressional candidates responded by trying to direct the attention of constituents to parochial concerns, while their Democratic counterparts followed the lead of their party's presidential nominee, Senator Barack Obama of Illinois, by highlighting popular pro-Democratic issues and calling for change. On Election Day, the Democrats were set to increase their numbers by 21 seats in the House and 8 seats in the Senate.

Economic unrest and voter discontent resulted in the 2010 election becoming the third nationalized election in a row. However, this time Democratic control of the White House and Congress led congressional Democrats to focus on local concerns and offer little in the way of a national message. It also resulted in many Democrats being swept from office by a rising Republican tide. The Tea Party movement's success in mobilizing antitax, antigovernment, and anti-establishment voters in support of conservative Republican candidates contributed to the Democrats suffering a net loss of 63 House seats, enough to give the Republicans a healthy majority in Congress's lower chamber.

A presidential election year and the first election cycle to follow redistricting, the 2012 election can be readily classified as a status quo one. The high-profile issues were the same as in the previous three elections, but as a result of divided government, Obama's 50 percent approval ratings, and only small differences in public support for the Democratic and Republican parties, neither party was positioned to claim credit or assign blame—two necessary ingredients to producing a nationalized election. This is not to suggest there was little turnover in membership. Redistricting and a dismal 12 percent approval rating of Congress contributed to the defeat of 13 House members in primaries and the ouster of another 27 in the general election.[56] Two senators also were defeated. When the dust settled, the Democrats had gained eight House and two Senate seats.

The 2014 election, like several other recent contests, demonstrated that despite the inherent advantages of incumbency, the political setting in a given year can pose obstacles for some lawmakers. Compared to 1992, when 19 House incumbents lost their primaries (a post–World War II record), and 2010, when 54 lost in November (the most in 63 years), the defeat of 4 incumbents in the primaries and 13 in the general election may seem unimpressive (see Table 1-3).

Donald Trump was front and center in both the 2016 and 2018 election seasons. His unorthodox campaign earned unprecedented free media coverage, but the incivility of his rhetoric and his widely publicized and derogatory comments about women, minorities, and immigrants led to tactical divisions among Republican candidates. Some candidates embraced the president, and some sought to distance themselves from him. In 2018, Senate candidate and then House member Mike Braun (R-IN) embraced the president, welcomed him at three campaign rallies, and emerged from the general election victorious. His former House colleague, Minnesotan Jason Lewis, who also ran as a Trump Republican and attended a local rally with the president, was not so lucky; he lost to the Democratic challenger Angie Craig, whom he had bested in an open-seat contest just two years earlier. Other candidates, including Representative Curbelo of Florida, distanced themselves from Trump and requested that he bypass their states during his cross-country campaign tour.

Dissatisfaction with Trump's presidency also had an impact on the Democrats. It motivated many strong Democrat candidates to run for Congress, and it enabled them to mobilize large numbers of donors, political activists, and voters in their support. The outcome was the defeat of 30 House Republicans and no incumbent Democrats in the 2018 general election.

The competition in 2018 is further evident when one considers that 788 House candidates ran in major-party contested general elections. When these candidates are divided into categories on the basis of the closeness of their elections, it becomes apparent that 41 percent of them ran in competitive districts. This group is composed of the 17 percent of candidates classified as "incumbents in jeopardy" on the basis of their having lost the general election or having won by a margin of 20 percent or less of the two-party vote; the 17 percent of candidates who opposed them (labeled "hopeful challengers"); and the 7 percent of candidates (classified as open-seat "prospects") who ran in contests decided by 20 percent or less of the two-party vote (see Table 1-4). The remainder of the candidates, who were involved in uncompetitive races, are referred to as incumbent "shoo-ins," "long shot" challengers, and "mismatched" open-seat candidates.[57]

Similarly, the mood in 2018 intensified the competition in some Senate races, but most voters had limited outlets to express their discontent because Republicans held only 9 of the 35 seats up for election and most were GOP strongholds. By contrast, Democrats had to defend Senate seats in 26 states, including 10 in states carried by Donald Trump in 2016. No incumbents were

Table 1-3 Number of Unchallenged and Defeated House Incumbents, 1990–2018

	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Incumbents															
Unchallenged by major-party opposition in general election	76	25	54	20	94	63	78	64	55	64	27	40	66	44	46
Incumbents defeated															
In primary	1	19	4	2	1	3	8	2	2	3	4	13	4	5	4
In general election	15	24	34	20	6	6	8	7	20	19	54	27	13	8	30

Sources: Compiled from various editions of *CQ Weekly* and *Congressional Roll Call* (Washington, DC: CQ Press). The primary and general results are from Norman J. Ornstein, Thomas E. Mann, and Michael J. Malbin, *Vital Statistics on Congress: 2001–2002* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2002), 69; *Ballotpedia*, and Herrnson's data.

Notes: Some years include incumbent-versus-incumbent races, including nonpartisan open primaries held before the general election, and general election contests (in California) and runoffs held after Election Day (in Louisiana).

Table 1-4   Competition in House Elections, 1990–2018

	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Incumbents															
In jeopardy	15%	14%	17%	15%	14%	11%	8%	9%	14%	14%	17%	17%	13%	12%	17%
Shoo-ins	32	25	27	29	31	35	35	37	32	32	28	26	31	32	25
Challengers															
Hopefuls	15	14	17	15	14	11	8	9	14	14	17	17	13	12	17
Long shots	32	25	27	29	31	35	35	37	32	32	28	26	31	32	25
Open-seat candidates															
Prospects	5	13	9	8	7	6	8	4	5	6	4	8	6	3	7
Mismatched	1	9	5	4	3	3	5	4	4	3	6	8	5	3	9
N	*696*	*794*	*766*	*812*	*680*	*746*	*694*	*732*	*754*	*758*	*812*	*702*	*714*	*750*	*788*

Source: Compiled from information collected from the Federal Election Commission, state boards of elections, and secretaries of states' offices.

Notes: Figures are for major-party candidates in contested general elections and a small number of runoff elections, excluding incumbent-versus-incumbent races and elections won by independents. Incumbents in jeopardy are defined as those who lost or who won by 20 percent or less of the two-party vote. Shoo-ins are incumbents who won by more than 20 percent of the two-party vote. Hopeful challengers are those who won or who lost by 20 percent or less of the two-party vote. Long shot challengers are those who lost by more than 20 percent of the two-party vote. Open-seat prospects are those whose election was decided by 20 percent or less of the two-party vote. Mismatched open-seat candidates are those whose election was decided by more than 20 percent of the two-party vote. Some columns do not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

swept from office during the primaries, but five senators—four Democrats and one Republican—lost in the general election (see Table 1-5).[58] When the classification scheme used for House candidates is applied to the Senate (see Table 1-6), it becomes even more evident that 2018 witnessed many competitive incumbent-challenger contests and a fair share of spirited open-seat races.

The desire for change that unseated so many congressional incumbents also took its toll on the midterm elections for state offices. After all the votes had been tallied, five governors—three Republicans, one Democrat, and one independent—had been defeated; 330 Republican and 119 Democratic state legislators had lost reelection; and the Democrats had scored a net gain of seven governorships and six legislative chambers. The Republicans had gained a governorship and a legislative power-sharing arrangement with the Democrats in one state (Alaska).[59] The outcomes of the federal and state elections in 2018 underscore that the national political environment can affect incumbents' prospects for reelection, the successes of each party's candidates, and partisan control of political institutions. The outcomes also demonstrate that the local political settings and the offices contested also are important. The blue wave that scuttled the careers of many Republican U.S. House members and swamped disproportionate numbers of GOP governors and state legislators washed out only one Republican U.S. Senator.

The heightened competition faced by incumbents is both a cause and effect of the close competition for partisan control over both federal and state political institutions. Regardless of whether current officeholders face stronger challenges in nominating contests, in the general election, or in neither contest, they have had to adapt to a new era of volatility to survive politically. As one member of Congress explained, "One can't be overconfident these days; I'm running scared. So are most of my colleagues."

The competitiveness of congressional elections influences the number of new faces in Congress. As a group, those serving in Congress in 2019 were more diverse than those who had served a decade earlier. The House opened its first session of the 116th Congress with 63 more women, 14 more African Americans, and 25 more Hispanics than had served in the 107th Congress. Change generally comes more slowly to the upper chamber. Twenty-five female senators served in the 116th Congress, 11 more than those who served in the 107th. The Senate also increased its African American and Hispanic memberships from zero to three and four, respectively.

Despite this increased diversity, the vast majority of newcomers had at least one thing in common with one another and with their more senior colleagues: They came to Congress with significant political experience. Eighty-two percent of all first-term House members in the 116th Congress had previously been elected to office, served as a party official, worked as a political aide or consultant, or run for Congress; the remainder were political amateurs. All but eight of the new members sworn into the Senate for the first time in 2016 had previously held elected office.[60]

Table 1-5   Number of Unchallenged and Defeated Senate Incumbents, 1990–2018

	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Incumbents															
Unchallenged by major-party opposition in general election	5	1	0	0	0	1	4	0	1	1	1	2	2	0	0
Incumbents defeated															
In primary	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	3	1	0	0	0
In general election	1	4	2	1	3	6	3	1	6	4	2	1	5	2	5

Sources: Paul S. Herrnson, compiled from various editions of *CQ Weekly* and *Congressional Roll Call* (Washington, DC: CQ Press). The primary and general results are from Norman J. Ornstein, Thomas E. Mann, and Michael J. Malbin, *Vital Statistics on Congress, 2001–2002* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2002), 70; *Ballotpedia*; and Herrnson's data.

Note: The figures for 2014 include Senator Mary Landrieu, who was defeated in December in a runoff election. The figures for 2016 and 2018 include a California general election that pitted two Democrats against each other, and the 2018 elections in Maine and Vermont were won by independent senators Angus King and Bernie Sanders, who caucus with the Democrats and faced major-party opposition.

Table 1-6 Competition in Senate Elections, 1990–2018

	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Incumbents															
In jeopardy	20%	22%	23%	21%	15%	17%	18%	12%	22%	19%	13%	13%	22%	26%	30%
Shoo-ins	25	16	14	9	28	26	20	27	23	24	17	29	16	18	15
Challengers															
Hopefuls	20	22	23	21	15	17	18	12	22	19	13	13	22	26	30
Long shots	25	16	14	9	28	26	20	27	23	24	17	29	16	18	15
Open-seat candidates															
Prospects	3	21	14	35	9	15	24	22	7	6	25	15	12	6	3
Mismatched	7	3	11	6	6	0	0	0	3	9	17	2	12	6	6
N	60	68	70	68	68	66	60	64	60	68	72	62	68	66	66

Source: Compiled from information collected from the Federal Election Commission, state boards of elections, and secretaries of states' offices.

Notes: See the notes to Table 1-4.

SUMMARY

The Constitution, election laws, campaign finance regulations, and participatory nominations provide the institutional foundations for the candidate-centered congressional election system. The United States' history and individualistic political culture, which inform Americans' traditional ambivalence toward political parties, shore up that system. Candidates who can afford to hire political consultants to learn about and contact voters have benefited from technological advancements, which have allowed the system to assume its contemporary pro-incumbent, professionally oriented, money-fueled form.

How campaigns are conducted in the future will be influenced by changes in the strategic environment in which congressional seats are contested. Significant modifications in campaign finance regulations resulting from federal court rulings, for example, have led to huge soft money expenditures on independent media campaigns and coordinated grassroots campaigns that currently, and will continue to, affect the methods some candidates, party committees, and interest groups use to contact and mobilize voters. Similarly, recent developments in social media and data mining have just begun to make their impact felt on political communications, voter targeting, and other aspects of campaigning.