Expressive Politics

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Boatright, Robert G.
Expressive Politics: Issue Strategies of Congressional Challengers.
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Introduction

When Americans awoke on the morning following Election Day 2000, the outcome of the previous day’s presidential contest had not yet been decided. When residents of New Jersey’s Twelfth Congressional District awoke that morning, they also did not know who their congressman would be. In this race, incumbent Democrat Rush Holt had faced a stiff challenge from the district’s former representative, Republican Dick Zimmer. It would not be until November 29 that Zimmer finally conceded that Holt had won the race, after a recount showed Holt with a scant 746-vote edge out of almost 300,000 votes cast (Siegel 2000).

Zimmer, who had given up the seat in 1996 to run for the Senate, attracted the attention of the national news media in his campaign because of his own formidable stature and because the Republican primary to take on Holt had featured a high-stakes battle as well, pitting Zimmer against yet another former representative from the district, Mike Pappas. Pappas had succeeded Zimmer in 1996 only to be defeated by Holt in 1998. As a member of the House from 1990 to 1996, Zimmer had established a moderate profile as a fiscal conservative who fought the Clinton administration on healthcare issues but had sided with chamber Democrats on environmental issues and had sought to establish a cautiously pro-choice stance. Among the achievements he was most proud of was his work on “Megan’s Law,” a provision of the 1994 crime bill requiring that communities be notified when a paroled sex offender moves into the area.

Holt had sought to establish a record not dramatically different from Zimmer’s; in order to court the district’s affluent, well-educated voters, Holt had gained a seat on the House Budget Committee and had sought to position himself, as well, as a fiscal conservative and as a defender of scientific and medical research funds. The two candidates argued vigorously over federal budget priorities and over their competence at understanding fiscal issues, but there were few great ideological differences in the positions they took. Most of the conflict between the candidates revolved around each other’s campaign tactics. Many local newspaper endorsements took a stance similar to that of the Hunterdon Review (2000), which concluded its endorsement of Zimmer by saying, “The Twelfth District would be very well-served by either candidate.”
The Holt-Zimmer race was watched by political analysts and congressional experts around the country; it was seen by many as a “must win” for both parties in their quest to come out of the election with majority status in the House. Both candidates received generous support from their parties and from donors around the country; each candidate spent just under two million dollars in hard money, with soft money expenditures in excess of that amount (see Berinsky and Lederman 2003). Zimmer surely had a fair shot at explaining his views to voters and at drawing contrasts between himself and Holt.

Other New Jersey candidates, however, were not so fortunate. Among the neighboring races were a contest in the Cape May area of the state which pitted Democrat Edward Janosik, an eighty-two-year-old former political science professor, against third-term Republican incumbent Frank LoBiondo; a race in the overwhelmingly Democratic district around Camden featuring Republican challenger Charlene Cathcart, a young attorney, running against fifth-term Democratic incumbent Rob Andrews; and a contest in the Trenton area between Democratic state legislator Reed Gusciora and Republican incumbent Chris Smith. Spending by the challengers in these three races combined was under $120,000, and the combined vote total for these three challengers was less than Zimmer received.

What happened in these races? Did these candidates commit any gross strategic errors? It seems unlikely that even had they done so these errors would have been noticed, because the budgets of these candidates seem insufficient to gain media attention. The local media paid scant attention to the three candidates. Janosik received some coverage merely because of his age; he was quoted in one newspaper article acknowledging, “I’m running because I always wanted to, and to give Frank LoBiondo some competition. No one should have a free ride into Congress” (Curran 2000). Gusciora received coverage in the Trenton newspapers, but even despite the dramatic contrasts he drew between himself and Smith, he was unable to force Smith to debate or to acknowledge him. In each of these races, the competing issue platforms were far more diverse than in the Holt-Zimmer race: Gusciora savaged Smith for his views on healthcare, civil rights, and abortion; Cathcart took issue with Andrews’ opposition to the George W. Bush’s tax plan; and Janosik criticized LoBiondo’s views on healthcare and gun control. To judge merely by the degree of difference between the candidates, these races ought to have been livelier than the race between Holt and Zimmer, for these races represented what voters often claim to want
from elections—issue-based competition and real choices. However, these races were neither close nor particularly prominent on the radar screen of New Jersey voters.

Despite the drama behind their campaigns, this is not a book about the Dick Zimmers and Rush Holts of the world. Their race was atypical. This book is about the way the majority of contests for Congress take place. For every congressional campaign like the Holt-Zimmer race there are more than a half dozen like the challenges to Rob Andrews, Chris Smith, and Frank LoBiondo. And the ratio of uncompetitive races to competitive races has been growing more lopsided over the past decade. Holt was one of only thirty-nine incumbents who garnered less than 55 percent of the vote in 2000; had he lost, he would have joined a group of only six incumbents who were defeated in the general election. Political scientists have the tools to document these rising inequalities, and they have the tools to explain why this trend is occurring. This trend, however, has begun to make political scientists’ understanding of campaign dynamics less and less applicable to congressional races. We may know why more and more congressional races are as unbalanced as the challenges to Andrews, Smith, or LoBiondo were, but we do not know why someone in the position of Cathcart, Gusciora, or Janosik would run, how he or she would choose to campaign, or why the existence of candidates such as these makes any difference. This book is about such challengers. It is about how people run for election to “the people’s house” in the races where most people are not paying attention.

**The Challenger’s Dilemma**

For the past four decades, the study of campaigns and electoral competition has been dominated by a view of elections as pitched battles between two relatively evenly matched adversaries. Empirical studies have focused upon the winners of these battles. They have told us much about how the holders of political office got there, what characteristics they share, and how they maintain their grip on their offices. Meanwhile, theoretical studies have told us much about “rational” campaigning, about what ideological or policy stances candidates will take if they are aware of what opinions the voters hold.

Over these same four decades, however, the degree, or the frequency, of electoral competition in American politics has been declining at the national level. Since 1948, the average vote share of House of Representatives incumbents who even face major party competition has never dipped
below 60 percent (Jacobson 1997a, 23). In this same period, over 80 percent of incumbent House members have been reelected in every election. Few Americans can even name or intelligently discuss the challengers to these candidates (see Jacobson 1998). Since 1980, Senate incumbents have fared just as well. Even incumbent presidents, while not as overwhelmingly successful as members of Congress, have won more landslide victories in the previous five decades than ever before in American history. Presidential vote margins of 20 percent or more have become almost the norm in races featuring an incumbent, and only five presidents have been defeated in the nineteen presidential reelection bids in this century.1

The rise of the incumbency advantage in American elections poses a dilemma for those seeking to study ideological competition in elections. Many treatments of campaign competition derived from the rational choice or “median voter” approach to elections hold that incumbents should fare no better than their opponents if both understand voter preferences accurately. These candidates should take nearly identical positions and thus split the vote evenly. According to several of the more technical models of ideological competition, incumbents should, in fact, tend to lose their reelection bids (see, for instance, Tullock 1981; McKelvey and Ordeshook 1976).

This clearly is not happening in the United States. As a consequence, many students of electoral competition have turned to alternate theories that account for the incumbency advantage. In such retrospective voting models, voters first measure the incumbent’s performance against their own personal standard—i.e., has the economy gotten better or worse during the tenure of the incumbent? Have their own economic circumstances improved or declined?—and only if they are dissatisfied with the incumbent’s performance do they turn their attention to the challenger (Fiorina 1981). Such models have been highly successful at predicting voting at the presidential level and have also been useful for predicting voting in other types of elections (Rosenstone 1983; Tufte 1978; Kramer 1971).

Looking at election outcomes in this manner, however, tells us little about the behavior of those who challenge incumbent officeholders. Indeed, the best advice a potential challenger might gain from these studies is not to bother. Barring a sudden turn of events such as a scandal or an economic collapse, the challenger is unlikely to win no matter what ideological positions he or she takes. The centrist strategy of the median voter model would be unlikely to lead to victory. Yet in the vast majority of congressional elections, challengers do emerge, and they often run campaigns as spirited and vigorous as their meager campaign budgets allow.

Are these candidates, then, irrational? That is, is it irrational for them to run? Even if they have rational reasons for running, is it then irrational
for them to follow any strategy other than a vote-maximizing, election-seeking strategy? The existing literature has a mixed record in answering these two questions. In their evaluation of George McGovern’s failed 1972 presidential bid, Miller, Miller, Raine, and Brown (1976) argue that McGovern fundamentally misunderstood the preferences of American voters. They claim that he took positions that were clearly unpopular among a large majority of voters. The aforementioned retrospective voting models indicate, however, that whoever ran against Richard Nixon in that election was, regardless of the issue positions he or she took, doomed to lose by the same margin by which McGovern lost. This argument directly contradicts the Miller et al. argument—if McGovern knew he was certain to lose, did he really take his issue positions based upon erroneous information about what voters wanted? What did he stand to gain by taking more popular positions? Did his unpopular positions lead to his defeat, or did his likely defeat lead him to advocate positions quite different from those of his opponent? The same question might be asked of other candidates facing long odds. When we find other candidates making unorthodox, extreme, or quixotic policy statements, are these statements a harbinger of defeat, or are they a reaction to impending defeat?

Turning back to congressional elections, there has been a steady stream of literature analyzing why challengers to popular incumbents emerge and what reasons they have for running. Losing candidates, at any level of American politics, have held an intrinsic fascination for political scientists. Canon (1990, 1993), Huckshorn and Spencer (1971), Kazee (1980, 1994), Leuthold (1968), Kingdon (1966), Fishel (1973), and Maisel (1986) have all conducted analyses of congressional candidates, seeking to determine what motivates these candidates, and especially congressional challengers, to run for office. Some of these works have pointed out areas in which challengers are misinformed, deluded, or overly optimistic. There is a growing tendency in this literature, however, to refrain from deeming such candidates “irrational.” Canon (1993, 1138) notes that many such candidates “do not think they have a realistic chance of winning. Instead, they run to air various issues, to advertise their business, or for other reasons, along with a modicum of office-seeking motivation. But their aggregate pattern of behavior reveals strategic and rational behavior among a group of challengers that has been largely ignored in the congressional elections literature.”

The above quote notwithstanding, however, most of these studies have concentrated on why candidates emerge to challenge incumbents, particularly popular incumbents. Few political scientists have analyzed the logic of such campaigns—that is, there are few studies that investigate how such
candidates approach ideological competition. If we are to refrain from judging such candidates to be irrational or misguided, then it is certainly difficult to claim in turn that their strategies of issue competition are misguided. The aim of this book is to provide insight into the way competition in most congressional elections now takes place—insight into how candidates run for office when their chances of winning are slim.

Much of the argument in this book consists of stories about how individual races for Congress in the 1990s were run. But there is also a theoretical point to these descriptions. I argue that the dominant theories of “rational” campaigning can and should be amended to account for the advantage incumbents hold in resources, visibility, and ability to gauge voter preferences. If we are to hold political competition to be a good thing, we ought not also to insult the candidates who attempt to bring competition to races, even at the expense of long campaigns that will almost certainly fail to yield the office they seek, by dubbing them irrational. Such candidates are not irrational, nor are they naive about their chances of winning. In this book I offer an alternative to the standard two-party or two-candidate ideological competition model. I contend that many political campaigns are best viewed as what I call “expressive campaigns,” as means of voicing opposition to the status quo, even where such opposition will not yield victory. Such campaigns are frequently unencumbered by careful consideration of the median voter, for that voter is unlikely to pay attention to the challenger’s campaign.

In chapter 1 of this book I briefly trace the simultaneous development of electoral competition models in political science and the decline of competition in American elections. Despite the technical sophistication of many explanations of candidate competition, the limited applicability of these explanations to more than a handful of elections has been part of a growing divide within political science between theorists and those who perform more descriptive or applied work. In this chapter I contend that greater attention to the role of ideological expression in congressional campaigns—expression which occurs primarily where one candidate is at a substantial disadvantage—can bring about a reconciliation between these strands of political science. In addition, a recognition of the importance of the articulation of political views in these campaigns highlights built-in channels for political dissent within our system of government.

Chapter 2 considers existing models of candidate competition on issues in greater detail. While I argue that the median voter conception still
dominates our understanding of campaigns, this model has been improved upon and altered substantially since the 1950s. In addition to outlining in greater detail the context of this model, I also discuss other means of describing candidates’ ideological positions. Several political scientists have pursued the implications of this model in greater mathematical detail than did its originator, Anthony Downs, and several of them have contradicted his findings. Others have taken issue with his assumptions and have developed similar models which stem from slightly altered assumptions. I explore literature in American politics and in comparative politics which has refined, disputed, or reinforced the median voter conception. I then propose a slight refinement or alteration which employs a sequential positioning framework—a scenario in which challenger positions are a reaction to the incumbent and the incumbent’s popularity—and which allows for candidates’ issue positions as a form of political expression. Such a scenario can bring about issue positions and outcomes quite different from those posited in most models. These are outcomes which still embody rational candidate behavior, but which do not feature the candidate convergence which is a hallmark of most two-candidate or two-party electoral competition models. Here, the campaign is, if not entirely an “end” in itself, not solely a means toward the end goal of winning election.

In the context of American elections, there is no better arena for exploring inequalities in electoral competition than in races for the House of Representatives. In chapter 3 I document the prevalence of expressive campaigning using data drawn from a 1996 survey by Congressional Quarterly and Time of all major-party House candidates. These data demonstrate that incumbents do act in a risk-averse manner; their positions on issues are highly correlated with the partisan allegiances of their constituents. The positions of challengers do correspond somewhat with district preferences, but to a much lesser degree than do those of incumbents. These data lend support to the notion that incumbents do have either better knowledge of voter preferences or more of an incentive to act upon those preferences. These data provide evidence, it would seem, that challengers are reacting to the incumbent and to the incumbent’s positions and popularity. In this chapter I also provide an overview of my interview method and the candidates with whom I chose to speak.

In chapters 4 through 6 I turn my attention to a subset of nonincumbent candidates in the 1996 elections, and I present data drawn from open-ended interviews with these candidates. Chapter 4 considers candidates’ assessments of public opinion. In this chapter I consider the information candidates have about voter preferences and about the probability they have of winning the election. I conclude that ideological divergence be-
tween incumbents and challengers does not arise because of a difference in information. Nonincumbents, regardless of their level of competitiveness, are not demonstrably less well informed about voter preferences, and they do make accurate assessments of their chances of victory. Nonincumbents are quite aware of instances where their issue positions diverge from voters’ preferences, even without the means to conduct opinion polls or other rather scientific measurements of voter preferences. The idea that incumbents’ financial advantage over challengers results in better information only holds if information is a costly quantity, as would be the case if opinion polls were seen by candidates as a superior means of information gathering. These interviews suggest that candidates do not see opinion polls either as a means of information gathering or as a particularly accurate means of gauging voter preferences. Instead, candidates gather their information on voter preferences in other, less expensive ways. They regard opinion polls as a means of campaigning, of persuading others to support one’s campaign, not of gathering the information necessary to wage a campaign. If information, then, is not particularly costly, the incumbency advantage does not lie in superior knowledge of voter preferences.

In chapter 5 I turn to the issue positions themselves. I ask candidates why they took the positions they took in their campaigns, where they sought to diverge from their opponents, and where they sought to appear similar to their opponents. The candidates’ responses indicate that candidates’ beliefs about their own ability to win preceded their adoption of particular issue positions and issue emphases. Candidates sought to converge with their opponents where they believed their opponents’ positions to be popular and to emphasize their opponents’ unpopular positions only if they thought their chance of victory was good. If they did not believe they had a chance to win, they were reluctant to diverge from their own views about what policies were “right” and which policy positions to emphasize. This chapter provides further evidence that nonincumbents react to the incumbent’s views when they have something to gain from doing so; where they do not, they seek to run their campaigns so as to emphasize their own views and the views of a distinct minority of constituents in their district, even at the cost of potentially losing extra votes.

In chapter 6 I explore the role of one potential external influence on candidate positions, the views of their political party. If nonincumbent candidates are indeed well informed about public opinion and yet they choose to diverge from the positions that would, all other things being equal, maximize public support, it does not automatically follow that they merely say and do what they want, that they fall back upon their own individual, noninstrumental belief about what issue positions are “right”
and what issues are most important. Numerous other influences might influence their issue positions. I select out what I argue is potentially the most important of these influences, their political party, and investigate whether their party sought to encourage them to take particular positions. I conclude that political parties do indeed seek to sway candidates’ views, but that, consistent with other literature on parties, such influence has a rather benign effect and does not even necessarily move candidates toward the party’s own views, if indeed it has any. I separate party organizations in the states in which I conducted my interviews into strong and weak parties, based upon others’ assessments of these parties, and I conclude that strong party organizations tended to allow candidates the latitude to define their own campaigns. These parties served primarily as financial supporters and information providers, seeking to help candidates determine where voter preferences lie in their district. Weaker parties, on the other hand, do try to influence candidates’ positions in order to pull them away from positions favored by district voters and toward those preferred by party activists and leaders. Such efforts were viewed by candidates as a distraction to their campaigns rather than as a benefit. This chapter indicates that if a party’s own issue positions are preeminent where a candidate cannot hope to win by following public opinion, it is at the expense of coercing reluctant candidates into taking positions they themselves do not prefer.

In chapter 7 I document trends in competition and in expressive campaigning since 1996. I discuss subsequent developments in the districts I studied in 1996 and I discuss a second set of interviews from the 2000 election which drew upon a different sample of candidates from four different states. In this chapter I discuss the generalizability of the findings in the previous chapters—for the most part, the patterns I discuss in chapters 4 through 6 can be generalized to explain campaigns in other states, in other election cycles. In addition, I demonstrate how redistricting cycles and changes in levels of competition over time can affect the frequency of expressive campaigning.

In chapter 8 I consider the normative implications of expressive politics for political scientists and for American politics. Throughout this book I note that both theorists of political behavior and candidates themselves are somewhat ambivalent about the merits of pursuing a median voter strategy as opposed to the merits of having two candidates who take principled and contrasting positions. The fact that in American politics we simultaneously seem to prefer candidates who represent public opinion yet also complain when there is not “a dime’s worth of difference” between candidates is one reason why losing candidates receive so little attention in
American politics. In this chapter I explore the normative arguments for paying more attention to nonincumbent candidates and I describe means by which these candidates could also hope to receive more exposure to the public.

Here’s to the Losers

One losing candidate asked me, after I had finished interviewing him and had filled him in on the nature of this project, “A lot of people aren’t going to vote for you because you’re just like him. If you’re just like him, why vote for you?” This question might well serve as the epigram for this book. In a two-party system such as ours, the losing candidates comprise half of the names on the ballot by definition. We see their names when we go to the ballot box; in many cases this is the only time that we see their names. Frequently, the only news coverage a congressional challenger receives comes at the end of the race, when the local newspaper, in its endorsement of the incumbent, commends the challenger for raising issues and predicts a bright future for the challenger—either many years in the future, or in an arena other than Congress. Likewise, the incumbent, in thanking his supporters, will commend his opponent for running a campaign on the issues; he may even promise to work with him in the future on matters of mutual concern.

But are these editorials, or these incumbents, serious? Is there anything to be learned from challengers, or any benefit to having them run? Losing candidates are a frequent subject of fascination. Losing candidates in high-profile races, such as Barry Goldwater or George McGovern, are often studied for the lessons of their campaigns (see, for instance, Stone 1943; Thompson 1994). In the case of the congressional candidates considered here—most, but not all, of whom did lose their races—the lessons to be learned from their campaigns are less evident. Congressional candidates often trace a path, in the words of Sandy Maisel (1986), “from obscurity to oblivion.” The landslide losers in presidential races often ran extreme campaigns despite counsel from party leaders, or often sought to run more centrist campaigns but could not overcome media depictions (Page 1978, 118–42). On the congressional level, there are often few advisers telling a candidate how to run, and there are frequently few in the party who have any significant investment in the race. In short, there is often no one that cares enough about challengers in House races. On one level, this book is subject to the criticism that it focuses, at least in part, on individuals who run merely to take up space on the ballot. There are certainly a few such
individuals in my interview sample. To put a more noble gloss on these candidates, there are some who run solely in order to prevent the incumbent from going unchallenged. There are, however, several candidates in this sample who did win election. There are others who would run again in 1998 or 2000 and win or come close to winning. There are still others whose campaigns appear to have forced their opponents to rethink what they had been doing in Congress or in their campaigns. Many of these candidates, however, would return to their private lives after the ballots were counted, never to be heard from again in the political arena.

Such candidates are, however, representatives themselves in one sense. They represent citizens whose views, if there were not a candidate other than the incumbent on the ballot, would go unregistered on election day. They send messages to members of Congress which help these members to assess how popular their actions are among their constituents. They provide at least a semblance of competition so that incumbents must constantly be somewhat concerned about reconciling their positions with their constituents’ views. They provide an outlet for dissent. It is no accident that we often see arch-conservatives running in overwhelmingly liberal districts and vice versa, that the people who run against a Barney Frank or a Henry Hyde are people who would seem very unlikely ever to win the support of a majority in those districts whether or not Frank or Hyde were in the race. Those who could win a majority of the votes in an open-seat election in those districts have no reason to run; from an ideological standpoint, at least, they are satisfied with the incumbent.

In addition, these candidates can affect other candidates. They do this in three ways. First, they may help other candidates of their party by bringing voters to the polls—voters who will, in turn, vote for other candidates on the ballot. A challenger for Congress may boost the voting percentages of similar candidates for other offices. Second, they also may keep the incumbent in the district campaigning, preventing him from sharing his campaign war chest and his personal time with other candidates for office. And third, the issues these candidates raise may rub off on other candidates—they can raise issues that other candidates, be they of the incumbent’s party or the challenger’s party, might prefer to ignore.

Finally, these candidates do sometimes win. When they do, their victories may have profound policy implications. Candidates who do not expect to win, and whom observers, incumbents, and even voters do not expect to win, bring different views to Congress in the rare—but not nonexistent—cases where they do win. If these candidates did not campaign in a centrist style (relative to their district, of course), they may not wish, or may not know how, to change their strategies once elected.
(1990) has shown that political amateurs can dramatically change the behavior of Congress when they are elected. Others have argued that the Republican Party’s unexpected victories in 1994, which won them control of the House of Representatives, brought about turmoil in Congress in large part because many of the victorious Republican challengers had not followed median voter strategies and did not necessarily wish to do so once elected (Rae 1998; Fenno 1997). While many of these victorious candidates have eventually reverted to more traditional campaigning and governing, or were defeated for failing to do so, they did have significant effects upon government.

In this book I seek to explain, in as objective a manner as possible, what these candidates were doing in their campaigns. Any true effect that these candidates have upon politics is, in effect, a bonus. There is intrinsic merit merely in explaining why these candidates act as they do, if only to demonstrate ways in which we can understand electoral competition. But these candidates also represent a large part of our political landscape, of the choices that we voters have, and it is important to understand why they exist, how their campaigns are run, and how they are encouraged by our current political system.

There is a tendency in the literature on congressional challengers to close with recommendations as to how their lot may be improved. I have consciously abstained from doing so in this book. A major premise of almost every theoretical treatment of elections is that we get the representation we deserve. Almost all of the candidates with whom I spoke were engaging, dynamic people. In many cases, they may well have made better members of Congress than the incumbents they sought to unseat. Had they all done so, however, significant majorities of the constituents of these districts would have been represented by someone whose policy views conflicted with their own. In addition, had all of the incumbents they ran against truly been vulnerable, many of these candidates never would have become their party’s nominees to begin with. The passion and conviction many of these individuals brought to their campaigns made them ideal candidates for Congress, but these traits would not have made them good representatives.

It is impossible to measure the influence that these candidates truly did have on political events, but that is not necessarily the standard by which their campaigns should be judged. The fact that the competition for congressional seats features a truly high degree of diverse viewpoints should, at least, give comfort or pause to those who lament the lack of difference they see between political parties. Yet it should also be a reminder to any who hold that view that likely defeat is the primary reason for such diver-
gence. It is not the result, but the cause. This is particularly important to remember at a time when it seems that fewer and fewer congressional seats are subject to real competition. The rewards of such campaigns are sparse; in the end, in order to either run such a campaign or support such a campaign, one must be an idealist. One must have the strength to find solace in claims such as that of historian Porter McKeever (1994, 126), who concluded his study of Adlai Stevenson’s failed presidential campaigns by noting that “It is high time for us to reject the fantasy that ideas and ideals can’t win and to recognize these qualities as essential characteristics for those we choose as leaders. Good ideas have a life of their own, and good candidates strengthen the fabric of our society whether or not they win.”