CHAPTER 2

The Rational Candidate and the Hopeless Cause

Given the apparent incompatibility between theoretical treatments of “rational” candidate behavior and the reality of American congressional races, why should we turn to rational choice theory to provide guidance in understanding these races? One preliminary answer to this question comes from political theorist James Johnson. Rational choice theory, argues Johnson (1991, 117), is, or at least should be, a reconstructive theory. That is, “a presumption of rationality is a principle of charity. It mandates that when confronted with seemingly irrational action, the social theorist investigate the broader patterns of action, explore the social or political contexts, within which the perplexing action might be interpreted as rational.” In other words, rational choice theory attempts to reconcile the unexpected with more understandable patterns of human behavior. In the previous chapter two potential charges of irrationality seem to emerge when we are discussing congressional challengers. First, the fact that they emerge at all might be considered irrational if they are solely seeking election. Second, given that they do emerge, the issue focus of their campaigns might be deemed irrational if they do not conform to the median voter paradigm.

In the next chapter I document the ways in which congressional challengers do deviate from this paradigm. For now, it is sufficient to note that few of them do run centrist campaigns—indeed, the lower their chance of winning, the less likely they are to run centrist campaigns. The very fact that they emerge, however, despite the advantage incumbents frequently have and despite the overwhelming odds against their victory, brings into question the relevance of applying a median voter framework to their campaigns. It would certainly be in accordance with what we know about congressional candidates to allege that candidate incentives are more varied.
than most spatial competition models suggest. Where alternate incentives exist, rational reasons for candidate divergence also exist. Can a theory of issue competition make sense of these reasons?

In this chapter I argue that merely identifying candidates who are not solely seeking election does not prove that the median voter model should be thoroughly rejected when studying elections featuring an incumbent. It also does not mean that we ought to circumscribe the model’s predictions to cases where its predictions are fulfilled. As Martin Diamond (1959, 210) points out in his early review of Downs, a weakened median voter model is no model at all: “The revised ‘fundamental hypothesis’ would have to read: Some politicians formulate policy only for the rewards of office and some do not, and which behavior is decisive is a matter for study each time, all of which would leave political science in the difficult but fascinating position it was in before economic models were offered in succor.”

Diamond is not entirely correct. He is correct, though uncharitable, in his “revised” hypothesis. If we are able to specify, however, precisely when candidates formulate policy positions in order to win election to office and when they do not, the model is richer and no less comprehensive than it was before his revision. His conclusion about the position in which we are left, therefore, seems overstated. I argue here that considering—as a precedent to candidate position taking—two variables, candidates’ expected probability of winning and candidates’ noninstrumental policy preferences, enables us to make this specification while retaining a basic issue competition framework.

The incorporation of both of these variables suggests the rejection of one crucial tenet of nearly all existing spatial models of candidate competition—the assumption of simultaneous or unrestricted movement.1 The prediction of candidate convergence on policy is based in part upon candidates’ certainty about voter preferences and their uncertainty about their opponent’s ideological position. While it is true that in an election without a preexisting advantage for one candidate, an office-seeking candidate would choose to be at the electorate’s median (or at least closer to the electorate’s median than his opponent) even if he did know what his opponent’s positions were, in a case where that opponent has taken a median position and has a preexisting, nonideological advantage this incentive disappears. If a candidate’s maximum probability of winning is exogenously determined or truncated before he begins his campaign, his motivation to take a centrist position must also be reduced.

If this does occur then other incentives must enter into his calculation of which positions to take. It seems unreasonable to propose that candi-
dates do not have any noninstrumental policy preferences at all; if our models require citizens to have such positions, surely we must extend the same prerogative to candidates. Mayhew's (1974) conception of members of Congress as individuals who are solely oriented toward reelection does not mean that they do not have opinions about what policies are best; instead, it means that they sublimate these views to their desire to win election. In cases where the possibility of election is limited or nonexistent, I argue that these opinions are more likely to guide policy positions and to bring about divergent candidate strategies than they are without circumscribed election prospects.

Making these adjustments amounts, in effect, to turning the traditional median voter model on its head—instead of having issue positions determine outcomes, expected outcomes independent of the positions of one or both of the candidates determine issue positions. As I seek to show, this does not happen in all situations, but it does happen in frequent and identifiable circumstances—namely, in challenges to incumbents. Ultimately, I argue, if the assumptions of a candidate competition model are specified such that distinct classes of candidates deviate from the median voter paradigm in rational ways, Diamond's trap is avoided. That is, certain classes of candidates—here, those who face a popular incumbent—can be predicted to be running for reasons other than seeking to win, and they can be expected to adopt issue positions that diverge not only from those of the incumbent, but also from those of the average voter in the district. In this chapter I outline three alternatives which illustrate the consequences of relaxing the median voter model's emphasis upon simultaneous position taking. The first alternative assumes simultaneity; as a result, candidate competition still reflects Downs's theory. The second and third alternatives assume sequential positioning. Here, I illustrate cases in which candidates' personal views play a role in dictating their positions and cases where the views of organizing forces such as political parties take up the slack left when election-oriented positions are less likely to actually result in election. The end result of presenting these alternatives is to make a case for what I call the "expressive campaign," the campaign designed to present an ideological agenda to the public even when such an agenda will not result in the defeat of the incumbent. Candidates who conduct expressive campaigns, are, as I show in the remainder of this book, rapidly becoming a majority among nonincumbent congressional candidates—if indeed they have not always been a majority.
Candidate Incentives: The Theoretical Context

Before setting forth the basic theoretical notions that underpin my argument, however, a review of some definitions is in order. In any model of ideological electoral competition, three variables are of primary interest: voter preferences, candidate positions, and outcomes. Voter preferences are simply the ideological positions voters prefer. In Downs’s setup, preferences are conceived of as points on a single line—for instance, from most liberal to most conservative (Downs 1957, 115–17). Candidate positions are, likewise, positions on this same line—a very liberal position, a very conservative position, or anything in between. Finally, outcomes are the voting results of a given race, whether seen as the share of votes for each candidate or the winner and loser of the race.

The standard sequential means of ordering these variables would be to put them in just that order:

(1) Preferences —> Positions —> Outcome

Here, candidate positions are not differentiated from each other. They are taken simultaneously, and they jointly lead to the voting outcome. This is the classic median voter scenario. Downs contends that “parties in a two-party system deliberately change their platforms so that they resemble one another” (Downs 1957, 115). If parties have relatively complete information about voter preferences, their positions will both be taken at the median of the voters’ preference distribution. For instance, if seven voters are arrayed along a line, the middle voter—voter number four moving in either direction—will dictate the winning position in this hypothetical election.

This conception holds that voter preferences are not malleable; voters know what they want from government, and they will evaluate candidates accordingly. Candidates cannot shift voter preferences to meet their own needs. If this were possible, scenarios such as the following might result:

(2) Positions —> Preferences —> Outcome

or

(3) Preferences₁ —> Positions —> Preferences₂ —> Outcome

In scenario (2) here, candidates take positions which influence voter preferences and then lead to the voting outcome. In scenario (3), candidates
assess voter preferences, take positions, and then seek to sway voters such that voters’ preferences are more in accord with the candidates’ positions. Why would candidates do this? A candidate with substantial power to sway the public—a candidate in office whose explanations of policy might influence voters, or a candidate with a substantial advantage over his opponent in the ability to advertise his positions and the reasoning behind those positions—might do so. This conception is not uncommon in comparative politics literature on governments with the power to set the public’s agenda (Przeworski and Sprague 1986). It may even apply to a unitary actor such as the American president (Geer 1996) or to a party’s leadership (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). The problem with using this scenario in this book’s empirical context, in looking at members of a large body such as the House of Representatives, is that citizens garner their political information from many sources. Any one candidate for office will have to compete with other candidates, with political elites not running for office, with the media, and with organized interests in communicating reasons for adopting any particular set of policy views. Even if one limits consideration solely to congressional persuasion, a collective action problem may result (Geer 1996, 21–22). This ought not to indicate that voter persuasion never happens, but the costs of successful persuasion may frequently be prohibitively expensive. Mayhew (1974, 32) notes in his discussion of marginal members of Congress—those who represent districts where both parties are competitive—that “There is after all the problem of generating collective action . . . the rational way for marginal congressmen to deal with national trends is to ignore them, to treat them as acts of God over which they can exercise no control.” This is not to say that members of Congress will not react to trends in public opinion; indeed, we know that they do act in responsive ways. They do not, however, act to change these trends themselves. It seems far more cost-effective to merely shift one’s positions in response to shifts in public opinion than it would be to attempt to move public opinion back to one’s own ex ante positions.

In simply looking at these three variables, of course, other plausible arrangements of these variables remain. One could, for instance, order these variables such that the outcome may be known before positions are taken:

(4) Preferences → Outcome → Positions

This proposition may seem absurd on its face, as the outcome of any election necessarily comes after candidates have taken positions. Candidates
may have information about the likely outcome of an election, however, which affect their decisions. A candidate may reason that “this district has overwhelmingly voted for Democrats, and it will continue to do so.” An incumbent may look back at previous vote margins and reason that “this district has always voted overwhelmingly for me in the past, and it is likely to continue to do so.” These assessments may not be certain, but they may influence candidate behavior. Of course, this argument is somewhat circular, in that previous voting is still based upon previous candidate positions.

Such previous voting seems likely to benefit an incumbent candidate more than a nonincumbent candidate. Mayhew also posits, however, that members of Congress are risk-averse: “What characterizes ‘safe’ congressmen is not that they are beyond electoral reach, but that their efforts are likely to bring them uninterrupted electoral success” (Mayhew 1974, 37). Incumbents, in addition, operate under conditions of uncertainty about their opponents; they can try to stave off a difficult challenge, but they cannot be certain that such a challenge will not take place. They have no incentive, even if they do have reasonably accurate guesses about what the election's outcome will be, to deviate from that position which will maximize votes. Thus, to place their positions after their beliefs about the outcome seems unrealistic.

What of nonincumbents, however? A candidate who challenges an incumbent enters a race with knowledge of who the incumbent is, what positions he has taken in the past, and how he has fared in the past. At the very least, the challenger is taking positions after the incumbent has already established positions:

\[\text{Preferences} \rightarrow \text{Position}_{\text{Incumbent}} \rightarrow \text{Position}_{\text{Challenger}} \rightarrow \text{Outcome}\]

Here, the incumbent takes positions under conditions of uncertainty—not uncertainty about voter preferences, which I shall consider in a moment, but uncertainty about the challenger's positions. The incumbent necessarily acts in accordance with the median voter theory. The challenger, on the other hand, knows where the incumbent stands. If the incumbent has inadvertently taken positions which do not guarantee at least a split of the vote—if the incumbent is mistaken about the median of the electorate's preference distribution and has taken a position away from the median—the challenger has an opportunity to defeat the incumbent. If, on the other hand, the incumbent has correctly gauged the median, and has adopted that position as his own, the challenger must reason that he has at best a
50 percent chance of victory—at best, he can ape the incumbent’s position and split the vote.

Can he really do this, however? If the challenger does have this information, then the proper sequencing of these variables should be

\[
(6) \text{Preferences} \rightarrow \text{Position}_{\text{Incumbent}} \rightarrow \text{Outcome}_1 \rightarrow \text{Position}_{\text{Challenger}} \rightarrow \text{Outcome}_2
\]

where the first outcome is the challenger’s assessment of the likely election outcome (or range of outcomes), and the second outcome is the actual result.

The relationship between this first outcome variable—the expected range of outcomes for the challenger—and the challenger’s position is the subject of inquiry for the remainder of this chapter. If the incumbent does take a position first, it stands to reason that the probability of victory for the incumbent is unbounded before that position has been taken; the incumbent has some control over the lower bound of this probability, but not of the upper bound. That is, if the incumbent correctly takes a median position, he has at least a 50 percent chance of victory, depending upon what the challenger does. A rational incumbent’s chance of winning will be bounded between 50 and 100 percent. The challenger, in turn, can have no better than a 50 percent chance of victory if the incumbent has adopted a median position.

This scenario presupposes no advantage to incumbency other than the fact that the incumbent chooses a position before the challenger does. This is a best-case scenario for sequential positioning. If the incumbent has further advantages, the bounds of the challenger’s probability of winning will be further circumscribed. To this theoretical construct one might add the empirical conclusion that over the past fifty years, the upper boundary on challengers’ probability of winning has been far less than 50 percent when they face an incumbent who is properly informed about voter preferences. In many cases, then, the challenger may enter a race knowing that his chance of winning is, for all practical purposes, zero. Theoretically, what this means is that the median voter, confronted with two candidates with identical positions, goes with the incumbent, the known quantity.

In any such situation, voter preferences play a very small role in determining a challenger’s ideological positions. If adopting positions favored by the voters will not improve one’s chance of victory, the incentive to do so declines. According to many, the entire rationale for running for office disappears. I argue in this book that such a rationale does not disappear, but that candidates are subject to different incentives when their
probability of winning is so severely bounded. The candidates who emerge will not be regarded as “serious” by their parties, by the incumbent, or by much of the public, and as a result they may serve to give voice to the “nonissues” or the ignored issues of which Bachrach and Baratz and Gaventa speak.

More specifically, I argue that three general types of campaigns are made possible. These types are consistent with the median voter framework to an extent; that is, they retain the notion that candidates and voters take positions that fall somewhere on a continuum from liberal to conservative, and they retain the notion that voters select the candidate they believe is closest to them on this continuum. In other words, the median voter remains pivotal. These types differ from the strict median voter model, however, in that they allow candidates to take positions sequentially rather than simultaneously and in that they posit a “first-mover advantage,” in which the first mover—the incumbent—wins if he successfully identifies the median of voter preferences and stakes out a position at the median.

This sequential positioning alternative leaves the challenger, or second mover, three options. First, the challenger can still pursue a vote-maximizing strategy and adopt a position only slightly different from that of the incumbent. In this scenario, the challenger’s motivations are scarcely different from those of the incumbent. Second, the challenger may adopt a position that accords with his “expressive preferences.” That is, he can adopt a position that most closely accords with the policy views he, as an individual, holds. This position is neither a vote-maximizing position nor a winning position, but where no position is a winning position he can maximize his own personal satisfaction with the way he has campaigned. He can further the cause of what he believes is “right.” Third, the challenger may be influenced by other actors who seek to draw him to their preferred position. Certainly the leading contender for this role is his party. If parties hold distinct noninstrumental policy views—views that they hold independently of concern for winning—they have no incentive to deviate from such positions where deviation will not yield electoral advantage. If, to take the obvious example from American politics, one party is somewhat left-of-center and one is somewhat right-of-center, the candidate will be a faithful messenger for his party’s platform, even where advocating such a platform will not help him get elected.

In the remainder of this book I test each of these alternatives on the 1996 and 2000 House of Representatives candidates. Before doing so, however, I briefly provide further details on each of these alternatives. On a purely descriptive note, it may seem obvious to the reader that the second of these alternatives seems most plausible. That is, given my argument
about losing candidacies such as those of McGovern and Goldwater, it
would seem that candidates with a slim chance of victory do not, in fact,
ape their opponents. Likewise, the weakness and ideological heterogeneity
of political parties has become a staple of American politics literature, so
we would hardly expect American parties to dictate positions to their can-
didates. These alternatives have several more subtle differences in the way
we study candidates who challenge incumbents, and they comprise a field
of possible theoretical treatments of political ideology that requires some
discussion of each. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to that discus-
sion.

Options for Candidate Competition

To recap the setup thus far, let us reconsider the quantities in which we are
interested. Above, I outlined several plausible arrangements of three basic
variables: voter preferences or positions on the issues of the day; candi-
dates’ positions on those same issues, and outcomes (or candidates’ expec-
tations about likely outcomes given any particular position). For the sake
of argument here, voters’ actual preferences are irrelevant; what matters
are candidates’ beliefs about voter preferences. The proof of the accuracy
of candidates’ beliefs about the voters is, as they say, in the pudding. That
is, a candidate can be mistaken without meaning that the candidate is be-
having irrationally. The outcome of any race can, of course, be known
after the fact, and if candidates are honest in their accounting of their cam-
paigns, we can also assess candidates’ beliefs about the outcome. Likewise,
we might imagine a means of scaling candidate positions or we might de-
pend on candidates, again, to tell us where they stand on issues. These
quantities, then, are somewhat measurable if we talk with candidates.

To these quantities let us add a few definitions of secondary variables. For
First, it is clear here that when we discuss candidates’ beliefs, we are talking
about information that they have gathered about their own circumstances.
Information, then, has a dual meaning. All candidates seek to gain infor-
mation, and reduce their uncertainty, over both the distribution of voters’
preferences (and the voting decisions that these preferences imply) and the
positions that have been or will be taken by their opponent. Candidates
would certainly like to know what their opponents are doing in order to
better understand how these positions affect their own chances. In the case
of a challenger, information about unpopular positions on the part of the
incumbent may imply an opportunity to defeat the incumbent, while inform-
ination indicating that the incumbent has not made blunders on the issues
implies the equally valuable (yet less heartening) conclusion that the incumbent is unlikely to be defeated no matter what the challenger does.

Second, the careful reader of Downs and other works in the candidate competition literature will note that while Downs and some of his successors present models with political parties as the actors, others refer to candidates in constructing their models. In this book, I have referred frequently to candidates’ ideological strategies, not parties. I do this because in this context candidates and parties are two distinct entities. It is true that virtually all successful candidates in American politics belong to one of the two political parties. Yet these candidates are not equivalent to the parties. For the most part, issue competition models can speak in terms of either one without confusion. Yet in practical terms, they are not the same. Downs refers to parties as “unified teams,” yet where parties must adopt different strategies in different constituencies in order to win elections, it becomes difficult to sustain this assumption. In other words, a Georgia Democrat is not the same as a Massachusetts Democrat, nor would the Democratic Party wish them to be if it is to win congressional seats. These candidates run before different constituencies, yet they must legislate, if elected, within one political system. In such a case, it makes sense to conceive of parties as a force exogenous to the candidates themselves—an entity that may have a rough ideological stance, but which allows considerable flexibility for its members to define themselves. Thus, I speak primarily here of candidate positioning, but I shall return to the role of parties, in the sense of organizations that can seek to shape the positions of their candidates but often do not do so, later in this chapter.

Third, it should be clear from the above discussion that I am also discussing two distinct quantities that candidates seek to maximize. Either they are trying to maximize their probability of winning or they are trying to maximize their vote share. The distinction here requires some explanation. A common early line of criticism of the median voter model is that the market analogy, in which candidates compete for votes much as businesses compete for customers, has limited utility in describing politics precisely because candidates gain little by winning by overwhelming majorities or in losing close elections. Barry (1970) and Przeworski and Sprague (1971) point out that in market competition, a firm always benefits from greater sales or more market share, while a party does not necessarily benefit from votes beyond a narrow majority or plurality. This argument is systematized by Riker and Ordeshook (1973), who substitute benefit maximization for vote maximization; in such an alternative, a party seeks to ensure victory and thus might prefer to seek as many votes as possible only where the preferences of voters are somewhat uncertain.\(^2\)
Given that we cannot seriously expect candidates to be able to calculate outcomes down precisely to the median voter—the vote that provides the magic 50 percent plus—one share—it can be difficult to disentangle a candidate maximizing vote share from a candidate maximizing his chance of winning. And in practical terms, increasing one’s chance of winning would seem to be the same as increasing the number of votes one receives. When we turn this statement around, however, it becomes apparent that increasing the votes one is likely to receive may not increase one’s chance of winning. That is, the value added in moving from 49 to 51 percent of the votes is obvious, but the value added in moving from 20 to 25 percent of the votes is not. In the latter case, our candidate still has been resoundingly defeated. There may be some fringe benefits that accrue from a respectable, but unsuccessful, campaign, just as there may be some fringe benefits that accrue from a landslide victory as opposed to a narrow victory. Yet there are trade-offs inherent here, and it seems somewhat sweeping to say that candidates always seek to gain as many votes as they can, insofar as these candidates may have to water down their message, to compromise the positions they have taken. Which of these quantities candidates seek to maximize, then, is an open question that I consider in this book.

Fourth, the discussion thus far in this chapter has considered only one set of preferences—those of the voters. Yet voters certainly are not the only actors in this game with policy preferences. Candidates certainly have them as well. Yet candidates have two different types of preferences. **Instrumental preferences** are preferences for a position that will enable a candidate to win office. A candidate may have beliefs about the positions he must take in order to win office that conflict with that candidate’s actual beliefs about what is right. These latter beliefs, which in game theoretic literature are often called *sincere preferences*, I here describe merely as *noninstrumental or expressive preferences*. That is, these are issue positions that candidates believe in independent of their utility in winning an election or gaining votes. All politicians have both types of preferences; it is the trade-off between the two that varies from one politician to the next. On occasion, we do hear stories of politicians who have “fallen on their swords,” who have taken unpopular positions because they sincerely believe that their conscience will not allow them to advocate something they do not think is right. Likewise, we also hear stories of politicians “selling out” what they believe in, making compromises in search of votes. For each politician—as, perhaps, for any human being—there is a trade-off here.

For the sake of my argument here, I propose that instrumental preferences dominate noninstrumental preferences where they increase a candidate’s chance of victory. That is, the candidate may well reason that some
compromises in order to attain victory will surely be worthwhile, for once he has been elected to office he will still do a better job than his opponent. Given, however, two different winning positions, it seems logical to assume that the candidate will then maximize his own personal satisfaction on this secondary dimension, by taking that position among those two that is most in line with what he truly believes. The converse of this argument, of course, is that where a candidate can take no position that is a winning position—where, for instance, he is hopelessly outmatched by his opponent on non-policy grounds—there is little rationale in taking any position other than one he truly believes is the “right” one irrespective of whether it is popular.

Fifth, and finally, it is necessary to specify the order in which candidates take positions. If nothing else, the description in chapter 1 of the incumbency advantage certainly indicates that incumbents adopt positions before their challengers. They are in office, they have made issue statements in previous campaigns, and they have a track record of voting on all matters of policy. Empirically, it seems obvious that incumbents position themselves first. Their challengers, then, respond to the incumbents’ positions, using easily available information about where the incumbent stands in order to form their own issue positions. Thus, in a challenge to an incumbent, sequential positioning is occurring.

With these definitions established, let us return to the options I discussed above. Table 2.1 lists four potential scenarios (the three I have already mentioned, plus a null hypothesis) for groups of elections in which party influence over candidates is either present or absent, and in which probability of winning for the second candidate is either known or unknown. Where \textit{ex ante} probability of winning is known, a two-stage game results; I assume that incumbents cannot know with certainty their probability of winning because they cannot know, when establishing positions in office, who their future opponent will be or what that opponent will do. Incumbents and open-seat candidates always operate under conditions of uncertainty about their opponent’s strategy; challengers operate with certainty about the position their opponent has taken and potentially, but not necessarily, about the incumbent’s (and hence their own) probability of winning.

As I describe each alternative below, I shall provide hypothetical scatterplots. These scatterplots are not intended as testable hypotheses; rather, they represent plausible arrangements of often unmeasurable variables. In each of these alternatives the primary subject of concern is the positions of challengers, not incumbents. In what follows, I assume incumbents to (a)
have knowledge greater than or equal to that of their opponents about voter preferences, and (b) to seek to maximize probability of winning, following Mayhew (1974).

Each of these options may be construed to contain candidates with a primary preference for maximizing probability of winning and a secondary preference for maximizing proximity to their noninstrumental ideal point. As I illustrate each of these alternatives, it is important to note the difficulty of assessing the trade-offs for candidates who believe their campaigns are neither hopeless, completely up in the air, or assured of victory before taking positions. Here, there is a trade-off between instrumental and noninstrumental position taking. In chapters 4 through 7 I discuss the ways in which candidates make this trade-off. For the purposes of illustration, however, I consider only candidates with a probability of winning of 0, .5, or 1, since the differences in the behavior of such candidates are of the greatest importance in distinguishing between the alternatives I discuss.

In each of the graphs that follow I also presume the existence of a left party and a right party; for the sake of illustration, the challenger is always of one party. That is, if we assume an ideological dimension running from 0 to 100, where 100 is the most liberal position and 0 is the most conservative, the graphs depict a challenger from the liberal party opposing an incumbent of the conservative party.
Let us move through these options, beginning with the common median voter model, and then considering the expressive campaign and other alternatives.

The Median Voter Model Reconsidered

As articulated by Downs (1957, 114–41), candidate convergence is predicated upon seven claims about party and voter behavior:

1. Each candidate takes policy positions as a means toward gaining office.
2. Voters judge candidates based upon the proximity of the candidates on policy issues to the voters’ own preferred position. Voter preferences can be reduced to a unidimensional policy space. They are single-peaked and monotonically declining from the voter’s ideal point. Voters prefer the candidate closest to them, the candidate who maximizes their utility (or minimizes their disutility) in this function. Voter preferences are exogenous to the actions of candidates.
3. All potential voters vote; there are no abstentions.
4. Candidates have full information regarding the distribution of voter preferences.
5. Candidates are free to position themselves at any point along the preference distribution.
6. Candidates choose positions simultaneously. One candidate cannot know ex ante where the other candidate will position himself, although following assumption 1, each candidate should presume the other to take positions rationally.
7. Candidates’ utilities are defined by the number of votes they receive; they are vote maximizers.

Given these seven assumptions, the result in a two-candidate election will be convergence at the median of the distribution of voter preferences. Figures 2.1 and 2.2 merely apply the median voter logic to multiple races. The median voter model contains no provision for any sort of ex ante probability of winning; here, I hypothesize a range of probabilities of winning which are either unknown or irrelevant to candidates in their choice of issue positions. If both candidates choose positions simultaneously, neither candidate knows his true probability of winning at any position because neither knows the strategy of his opponent. The intuition of this model is that if candidates have no knowledge of each other’s posi-
tions, they can be certain of no more than a split of the vote, a .5 chance of winning, at any position. There should thus be minimal distance between the candidates. Regardless of the actual (unknown) probability of winning, candidates will be clustered around the median of their preference distributions, as shown in figure 2.2.

The median voter model does not allow for motivations other than winning the election at hand. Victory is held here to be attainable for any candidate who chooses the correct policy positions. There is thus no range of winning positions; only one position can maximize probability of winning. If there is a personal advantage which accrues to one candidate, it is also not known. The only known quantity here is the distribution of voter preferences. Party control here can thus be construed as the ability to ensure that candidates have information about voters’ preferences.

For a particular group of elections, then, we would expect from the median voter model that ideological distance between candidates will be
small for each candidate pairing, and it will be independent of any non-policy factors that influence candidates’ chance of victory. We will be able to gauge nothing about candidates’ noninstrumental preferences. We will be able to identify no concerns on the part of candidates other than winning office or gaining as many votes as possible. These results remain faithful to Downs’s logic with the very slight exception of the allowance for a priori probability of winning to be established; in other words, the convergence prediction implies Downsian candidates in a game which is not necessarily as abstract as that of Downs.

One crucial extension of this set of hypotheses is that if we assume candidates to be vote maximizers, even the presence of an incumbency advantage, and therefore a sequential setup, has virtually infinitesimal influence on the positions candidates take. If the incumbent wins by taking a median position, a vote-maximizing challenger merely slides one slot to the left or the right, drawing an extremely slight contrast between himself and the incumbent. The logic of the median voter model still holds; candidates will differentiate themselves, but by as little as possible.

Many of Downs’s assumptions have struck observers as unrealistic. As Johnson (1991) notes, however, empirical evidence indicating that Downs’s model does not accurately explain political phenomena is not in itself a refutation of the internal logic of the median voter model; it only
suggests that certain assumptions do not hold in the real world. Nonetheless, much of the work done in the area of spatial modeling since Downs (e.g., Hinich and Munger 1994; Enelow and Hinich 1984 for lengthier treatments) has been devoted either to formalizing his propositions or to relaxing the above assumptions in order to increase empirical support for an economic model of candidate competition. It is certainly possible to construct an elegant rational choice model based upon unrealistic or erroneous premises, but such a model would have very limited utility to political science. Thus, empirical questions about each of the above assumptions have preceded theoretical work on the effects of alternate assumptions. In explaining the next three alternatives, I note areas in which I have incorporated criticisms of each of Downs’s individual assumptions.

**Challenging an Incumbent: Expressive Campaigning and Party-Based Campaigning**

Both of the alternatives on the right-hand side in table 2.1 rely upon discarding the simultaneity and vote maximization assumptions of Downs’s theory. Where sequential positioning occurs, and where candidates in fact choose to maximize probability of winning, not votes, candidate divergence may be rational. Where candidates take positions simultaneously, and are thus unaware of each other’s positions, maximizing probability of winning and maximizing vote share are equivalent. If one candidate can observe that another candidate has chosen positions first and has a nonissue advantage, the election is in effect over if the first candidate has taken his position rationally. In such circumstances, maximizing votes will have few benefits for a losing candidate.

In one sense, the simultaneity assumption can be relaxed without altering the outcome of the model. Simultaneous positioning necessarily implies a lack of information about one’s opponent’s position; hence, each candidate must follow a minimax strategy and assume his opponent to be rational. This ensures that each candidate will seek a median position regardless of the other candidate’s position. As Riker and Ordeshook (1973) show, however, simultaneity is a necessary assumption for a median voter outcome where candidates are vote maximizers. It is not a necessary assumption where candidates merely seek to win a bare majority. In the latter circumstance, a rational candidate should seek a median position even if that candidate has knowledge that his opponent has failed to take such a position. Whatever benefits accrue from winning a supermajority may be outweighed by the downsides of taking positions that may leave one vulnerable in a future election.
This seems like a rather rare defect to the model, however; this instance only occurs in cases where one candidate is irrational or misinformed and the other candidate knows the first to be irrational or misinformed. Where both candidates are rational and informed, and where one candidate has a first-mover advantage, the second mover can neither win a supermajority nor seek a split of the vote by aping the other candidate. The candidate who has moved first has “captured” a position. This is not an entirely novel conception in candidate competition models. Other models have sought to account for incumbents’ advantage, but they have not done so in the explicit context of a sequential movement framework. Feld and Grofman (1991; also Grofman 1993 and Merrill and Grofman 1997) have developed a theory of “incumbent hegemony” in which incumbents have a “benefit of the doubt” zone, a zone of invulnerability around their spatial position. Here, voters give the incumbent the benefit of the doubt if the incumbent’s positions seem relatively close to theirs because of nonpolicy attributes of the incumbent. If this zone includes the electorate’s median, the incumbent cannot be defeated. They extend this model beyond the unidimensional framework to argue that where it exists, the two-dimensional instability described by McKelvey and Ordeshook (1976) does not exist. In this alternative, the incumbent need not be precisely at the electorate’s median, only somewhat close to it. Thus, an incumbent might also be able to maximize utility in regard to secondary, non-vote-maximizing goals.

The Feld and Grofman model assumes simultaneity, but it hints at a two or more stage process. They demonstrate that, where this benefit of the doubt accrues to incumbents, “certain centrally located points will defeat any challenger by a substantial margin” (Feld and Grofman 1991, 117). Should a potential challenger suspect that this will transpire, competition and candidate entry will be deterred. Thus, a sort of two-stage process transpires where an incumbent establishes a central position and a potential challenger decides whether or not to run.

Groseclose (2001) does not make direct reference to Feld and Grofman, but his model of two-candidate competition where one candidate has a personal advantage is quite reconcilable with Feld and Grofman. Groseclose notes that any personal advantage, no matter how small, causes the Downsian equilibrium to disappear. Again, candidates choose positions simultaneously, but the advantage held by one candidate is exogenous and is known. Should this transpire, candidates know that if indeed they do converge, the candidate with the personal advantage will be the unanimous winner. Groseclose assumes “non-policy triviality”—that is, that the personal advantage is not so large that there is no pair of positions where the
disadvantaged candidate wins. Given this, the disadvantaged candidate will gain votes by moving away from the center if the advantaged candidate is at the center, and by moving toward the center if the advantaged candidate moves away from it. There is thus substantial allowance for candidate divergence. Groseclose closes by arguing that as the personal advantage of one candidate grows, the disadvantaged candidate adopts a more and more extreme position. This alternative is equivalent to Feld and Grofman’s benefit-of-the-doubt scenario.

Each of these models, as well as the incumbent hegemony model of Snyder (1994), assumes the establishment of a nonideological advantage but simultaneous establishment of positions. Retrospective voting, however, a factor which has been acknowledged as rational behavior by spatial theorists at least as far back as Downs (1957, 41), must be considered at least in part to be retrospective evaluation of the ideological pronouncements of a candidate. As such, it is difficult to imagine the establishment of a personal advantage on the part of an incumbent which is completely devoid of issue positioning. The incumbent must take positions while in office and before the true extent of his “benefit of the doubt” or personal advantage is known; a vote-maximizing incumbent thus has an incentive to adopt a median position as early as possible—before competition arises.

If simultaneity is not assumed, and where there are exogenous factors such as an incumbency advantage, information costs should decline for the second mover—this advantage should be observable. Divergence, then, becomes difficult to attribute to error or uncertainty. If we then allow for deliberate divergence, two different circumstances may occur. First, an advantaged candidate may have a range of winning positions. Second, a disadvantaged candidate may have no winning position. In the first circumstance, a candidate with a benefit-of-the-doubt zone and full information about voter preferences can take any position within that zone. In the second, a candidate with knowledge that his opponent has taken a winning position has a choice of many positions, all of whose probability of winning is zero. Where candidates position themselves sequentially, the candidate that chooses a position second may have a range of winning positions if the first mover has taken a suboptimal position, or he may be able to adopt any position without affecting his probability of winning (because he has no chance of winning) if the first mover has an advantage and has taken a position rationally.

These may seem to be relatively extreme circumstances, but they do necessitate the introduction of secondary goals for candidates if we are to make any claims at all about rational position taking. Even if the extreme nature of the above is reduced somewhat—where the probability of winning...
is not one or zero, but is highly restricted and there are secondary concerns, a candidate’s decision-making calculus may be affected. This begs the question of what these secondary concerns might be.

Where vote maximization is posited, there is always a trade-off between votes and noninstrumental policy concerns; even where one candidate has a significant advantage, there are votes to be gained or lost through movement within the ideological space. Several formal modelers (Groseclose 2001; Wittman 1973, 1977, 1983; Chappell and Keech 1986; Schlesinger 1975, 1994; Roemer 2001) have sought to model the trade-off between the two, assigning weights to each concern and constructing a utility measurement which accounts for both concerns. If probability of winning is posited as the dominant concern, however, a deterministic, sequential, and full-information model throws such secondary incentives into sharp relief—there is nothing else to guide candidate position taking across a range of positions where probability of winning is equivalent.

Secondary utility concerns have been inserted into hypothetical models, most notably in the work of Wittman and Chappell and Keech. These concerns are not directly measurable because they are idiosyncratic characteristics of each candidate. We cannot measure the actual preferences of candidates; even if we could ask them what they “truly” believe about policy issues, it seems unlikely that they would claim to be advocating policies which deviate from their *ex ante* beliefs for the sake of being elected or gaining votes. As Canon (1990, 27–30) notes, however, a candidate who truly believes he has little chance of winning has less incentive to compromise his positions; the very fact that he has chosen to run indicates that he is guided by his devotion to a cause, his desire to bring greater attention to his own *ex ante* preferences, or his desire to induce his opponent to address these issues. He will only make himself—and his fellow partisans—unhappy by deviating from such positions. Should this candidate find himself able to win, however, he may reason that even should he compromise his positions he will still be no worse in regard to these issues than his opponent.

Economist Albert Hirschman (1970) has noted that rational choice theory has not been able to successfully incorporate the twin phenomena of “exit” and “voice”—the fact that given a set of options, some citizens will decline to choose at all, to exit, while others will derive substantial value in making their dissatisfaction at the options they have been presented known—at seeking to change the rules of the game, in the long run, through voicing their own views. The exercise of voice seems to adequately describe the relatively powerless position of the long-shot candidate or party.
The primary testable question of this theory, then, is whose voice is being exercised. Two alternatives will be entertained here: first, that it is the voice of the candidate alone, or of some idiosyncratic group the candidate seeks to represent; and second, that the voice is that of the party, stripped of instrumental vote-maximizing or probability of winning concerns. As I shall discuss shortly, this is a useful test of the nature of parties—that is, not only of whether they can be seen as teams, but of whether they are indeed unified teams across different elections. A unified party could be presumed to hold all candidates who have little or no chance of victory to a common platform, while a party that exerts little control over candidates should produce candidates whose issue positions have little in common. As I conceptualize it here, we therefore have two options for defining rational position taking on the part of challengers: the expressive campaign and the party-based campaign.

**The Expressive Campaign**

In what I term the “expressive campaign,” probability of winning can be known by candidates, and there are no efforts to coerce position taking, by the candidate’s party or anyone else. Whatever utility candidates gain from their campaign derives from the satisfaction they receive from stating their views, educating the voters, or expressing their own ideas. We still have candidates seeking to maximize probability of winning, but with a secondary concern for maximizing proximity to their own ex ante or non-instrumental preferred position. This theory necessarily relies on sequential positioning insofar as the challenger chooses whether to advocate views that diverge from those of the incumbent or to move toward the district’s median based upon his assessment of whether the race is winnable.

Where the incumbent holds a personal advantage and has successfully identified and taken the median position, all positions for the challenger yield a probability of winning of zero. Where the incumbent has not taken a median position or where he is at a personal or nonpolicy disadvantage, the challenger may have a range of winning positions. We might posit that the former type of candidate would resemble the “policy amateurs” described by Canon—there is a selection mechanism operating here in which election-oriented candidates choose not to run, and the field is filled by candidates motivated by ideological or expressive concerns.

Note that this alternative does not preclude long-shot candidates from adopting positions close to the median. Candidates are assumed to vary in their noninstrumental preferences, much as do voters. A candidate would
appear to have less reason to challenge an opponent whose positions are
similar to his if his chances of winning are negligible, but, as much of the
research discussed in chapter 1 shows, challenges need not be based solely
upon policy grounds. We would thus expect, as figure 2.3 shows, that can-
didate positions will be randomly distributed for long shots (on the left of
the figure), but where probability of winning is high for the challenger,
candidates converge. There should be no correlation among the positions
of uncompetitive challengers save for a slight correlation imposed by my
sorting of candidates into left and right parties. In between these extremes,
candidates balance a desire to maximize probability of winning with a de-
sire to remain close to their ideal points.

If candidates are waging expressive campaigns, we would expect sev-
eral things. First, ideological distance between competing candidates will
vary less as the probability of winning for the disadvantaged candidate in-
creases. Issue distance will be lower across districts where candidates ap-
proach equal probabilities of winning than it will be across districts where
one candidate holds a significant advantage. Second, the lower a candidate’s chance of winning, the more apparent that candidate’s noninstrumental preferred position becomes. Third, although far less common, we may also observe attempts to maximize proximity to a noninstrumental ideal point by challengers who have a very high probability of winning. These candidates will move away from the median only to the degree that their probability of winning is not diminished.

This alternative seems also to be the most cost-effective strategy for both parties (at least in the short run) and candidates. Parties do not expend energy or resources seeking to choose candidates or coerce candidates into adopting a particular set of positions; likewise, candidates need not actually assess voter preferences unless they have a substantial probability of winning. This informational condition is perhaps the most important implication of this alternative. Candidates do need to be aware of whether they have a chance of winning. Where they do not have a chance, or where they have a fairly minimal chance, they do not have to gather information on where the median voter stands. If information about voter preferences is costly and it is not possible or worthwhile for candidates to gather this information—to conduct opinion polls, for instance—a general knowledge of their disadvantage is all the information it is necessary for candidates to have.

In addition, the option of expressive campaigning accords with the growing turn from exclusive attention to outcome-oriented behavior in rational choice theory. That is, in an expressive campaign, it is the campaign itself that is of value to the candidate, not the electoral outcome. In much of the terminology I use here to describe expressive campaigning, I rely on Schuessler (2000), whose theory of expressive choice by voters also emphasizes the noninstrumental benefits that accrue immediately from participation in political activities. In his theory, as in mine, the outcomes of this participation are of distinctly secondary importance in explaining the content of the participatory act or the decision to act at all. For Schuessler (2000, 5, 51), however, an “expressive campaign” is one aimed at fostering a sense of “expressive attachment” among voters, so that a vote is an expression for the voters of their identity. As such, expression can be entirely divorced from ideology or issue positions (Schuessler 2000, 59).

In the expressive campaign as I term it, it is the expression of the candidate, not the voters, that is of importance, and this expression is primarily defined through issue positions. That is, our theories share the turn away from exclusively outcome-oriented approaches, while differing in our expectations of candidate behavior and the role that the candidate’s audience (i.e., the voters) plays in expression. For Schuessler, voters, and
their attachment to candidates’ expressive statements, drive strategies, while in my own conception of expressive campaigning, candidate expression exists entirely independently of voters’ attitudes toward it. Candidates are, in his words, “producers of participation” (Schuessler 2000, 63), while in my theory candidates themselves are the participants of interest. The two theories are not at odds, but they seek to describe different political acts using a common rational choice conception of motivations and benefits.

In the chapters to follow I explore the existence of expressive campaigning in American congressional elections by describing my conversations with congressional candidates, some of whom engaged in expressive campaigns, some of whom did not, and some of whom were torn over whether to seek to take winning positions or to speak their minds regardless of the consequences. Above, however, I have merely sought to establish the plausibility and the rationality of the expressive campaign given particular assumptions about candidate competition. Before looking for empirical support, however, there are certainly other plausible and rational alternative theories of candidate competition to explore.

**The Party-Based Campaign**

Expressive campaigning is a consequence of unbalanced electoral competition and of benign neglect by the parties. This can, as I have noted, be cost-effective for the parties because they need not expend resources on candidates who are unlikely to win election. Yet parties, insofar as they may have ideological beliefs of their own, may nonetheless wish to maintain a party image or proclaim a party message in races where they cannot win. I noted above that while parties and candidates are often considered to be the same for the purposes of theorizing ideological competition, it makes sense in a context such as American congressional elections to conceive of them as two separate entities. Parties certainly may, and do, find advantage in encouraging party members who are running for office to break with the party on some issues where it will improve their probabilities of winning. As is the case for candidates, the grounding for this in the case of parties is simply that parties would assume that their members would be at least slightly closer to the party’s preferred position than would candidates of the other party. In the congressional case, having officeholders who vote with the party on procedural votes, to elect the congressional leadership and the like, clearly outweighs these members’ divergence on policy issues.
But what of the case where having candidates break with the party does not improve those candidates’ chance of victory? What of the long-shot challenger to an entrenched incumbent? The candidate clearly has little to gain in terms of probability of winning from breaking with the party, nor does the party gain from having this candidate do so. In fact, it may dishearten the party faithful in the district to have a candidate who does not share most party members’ views. There are many valid reasons to expect parties to seek to encourage candidates to wave the party flag, even if in a losing cause.

In figure 2.4, parties are able to enforce their *ex ante* preferred positions upon their candidates. Should parties be able to field strong challengers to the incumbent, they can then choose to lessen their enforcement of policy positions, as reflected by the deviations on the part of competitive challengers from any established party position (the upper right-hand graph in the figure). Parties, however, may not necessarily
need to encourage too much compromise here, insofar as an increased chance of winning the election may reflect greater proximity of the median voter to the party’s most preferred position.

A party-based theory would presume party unity in cases where candidates’ probability of winning is low. This alternative must be one with sequential positioning because parties must have several types of information. They must have information not only about the preferences of voters but also about the advantage the opposing candidate has, the position of that candidate, and the probability of winning in a campaign against that candidate. With such information, they are able to determine which candidates to exercise coercion upon to enforce a party position and which candidates to provide information aimed at allowing these candidates to deviate from the party’s platform in order to maximize probability of winning.

In this alternative, then, the “true” voice of the party emerges among candidates with a low probability of winning. This alternative says nothing about the strategies of candidates with a high probability of winning, although one might assume that they are relatively close to the party’s median as well, insofar as they did get nominated as the party’s standard-bearers. Because convergence here is dependent upon incumbents, however, it must be assumed that they do have some freedom of movement, or else all candidates would be polarized and each party’s probability of winning would be solely dependent upon the position of each constituency’s median voter. The hallmark of the party-based campaign is thus the similarity between candidate positions on the upper left-hand side of figure 2.4, where probability of winning is at its lowest. Similar positions for different candidates in this area of the graph indicate a level of party coercion or unity, while a range of positions for such candidates indicates a lack of unity which cannot be explained by concern for maximizing probability of winning under conditions of full information and sequential movement.

The plausibility of the party-based campaign in practice depends on the finitude of party resources. Can parties really pay attention to all of their candidates? If so, what types of party organizations are we talking about—the congressional campaign committees? State or local parties? Party officeholders? This alternative’s plausibility also depends on evidence about the ability of parties to choose their own candidates. There is scant evidence that parties can effectively tie their candidates to a set of positions, and most students of the congressional campaign committees agree that those committees concentrate only on viable candidates. As I explore later in this book, however, local party organizations do work to assist candidates or
steer them in particular directions, whether toward party positions or toward vote-maximizing positions. Empirically, we have little reason to believe that party-based campaigning of the sort I have described is widespread in congressional elections, but this should not stop us from evaluating the ways in which congressional candidates, particularly those who are not particularly likely to win, interact with the different types of party organizations. I explore these issues later in this book as I distinguish between expressive campaigning and party-based campaigning.

What If There Is No Pattern?

Finally, we are left with one other option in our table, shown graphically in figure 2.5. What if there is no pattern at all for challengers? What if we have a large number of idiosyncratic challengers, ignorant of their chance of victory, running all manner of odd campaigns? If this is the case, we might say that these candidates have not, in fact, drawn any conclusions about the incumbent or the district’s preferences save for the information necessary to counter the incumbent from their party’s side (again, in my hypothetical graphs, to the incumbent’s left). As I note above, incorrect or incomplete information gathered by candidates does not serve to refute the notion that candidates are behaving in a rational manner—one can make errors yet still be acting rationally. Let us, however, briefly consider another option—that campaigns are not, in fact, the sequential procedure that I have outlined in the previous two alternatives, that candidates are still acting more or less simultaneously. Simultaneous movement without some type of information, whether provided by parties or anyone else, is effectively no model at all. Here, there is little to guide candidate position taking save for their own assessments of voter preferences. If information about voter preferences is a function of resources, we can expect that the quantity or quality of resources will vary dramatically, and party provision of resources and information will not be present.

Such an argument depends upon alteration of as many as three of Downs’s assumptions: it must either posit that voter preferences are not single-peaked, and thus are difficult for candidates to respond to; that potential voters may abstain or threaten to abstain from voting, thus making measurement of the expected vote or probability of winning at any position difficult and of an idiosyncratic nature for candidates; and/or that candidates cannot gain relatively complete or accurate information about voter preferences. Let us entertain each of these objections in turn.

First, one could certainly posit “all or nothing” situations when voters
choose, for instance, to spend no money at all on missile defense, but prefer a substantial amount—enough to “do it right”—as a second choice. On particular issues, single-peakedness may not apply, and were such issues our sole area of consideration we could indeed question the spatial ordering of preferences. Where we aggregate issues into the type of liberal/conservative dimension used here, however, a situation that departs from unidimensionality becomes less easy to imagine. Alternate theories to that of Downs—most notably, the directional voting model of Rabinowitz and MacDonald (Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989; MacDonald and Rabinowitz 1993a, 1993b, 1998)—have sought to dispense entirely with the median voter framework, but have retained the basic dimensionality approach and much of the discussion here would still seem relevant under their model. And multidimensional models have also been proposed to extend the median voter framework beyond the simple line discussed here. As Ferejohn (1993) argues, however, unidimensionality may still remain
the most accurate way of depicting candidate strategies, and at least in the American case, a basic liberal/conservative organization of views seems the most inclusive of the various models of voter choice.

Second, abstentions would seem unlikely to affect candidates’ perceptions unless it is expected that the abstainers will come disproportionately from one side (see Adams and Merrill 2003). “Selective mobilization” remains a much-trumpeted candidate strategy—witness the Republican “silent majority” of the 1960s—yet in practice the results seem mixed (see Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). In the case of the challenger to an incumbent, at any rate, it seems unlikely that a resource-poor challenger could realistically expect to mobilize enough potential abstainers, or cause enough of his opponent’s likely supporters to abstain, to make a difference in the election outcome. Furthermore, a belief that there are abstainers who might be convinced to vote, or voters who might be convinced to abstain, is actually a belief about where the “true” median lies. Again, mistaken beliefs on the part of either candidate about the location of the median—a class to which the abstention issue belongs—do not invalidate these basic precepts about what candidates are trying to do in their campaigns.

Third, as noted above, we can certainly envision underinformed or misinformed candidates making unwise decisions about policy positions. This may, in fact, happen, but such an occurrence does nothing to undermine the alternatives I have discussed above. Again, insofar as my aim here is to document what candidates are trying to do, they can make mistakes without behaving irrationally. In regards to underinformed candidates, however, it is plausible that incumbents, or candidates with greater resources, can purchase better information (see Ferejohn and Noll 1978). However, as I document later in this book, even the most obscure congressional candidates are generally better informed than we often give them credit for being. That is, whether information is costly is more of an empirical question than a theoretical one. Our concern here is candidates’ beliefs and intentions, not the results of their strategies, so we cannot attribute a lack of any pattern in candidate competition to misinformation and thereby also conclude that the median voter model or the two sequential setups I have explained are not in play.

Figure 2.5, which depicts an absence of any type of pattern in challengers’ positions (save for the existence of a left and right party), is a null hypothesis, however one might seek to put a theoretical gloss upon it. Yet it must be built upon one or more of the above three assumptions. Two of these assumptions—that voter preferences are not single-peaked or unidimensional and that potential abstentions may alter a candidate’s strategy—are at least as questionable as the Downsian assumptions which they
seek to replace in the case of mass elections. The third, that candidates may lack complete information, also seems to have shaky support and in itself does not refute any of the above theories. This final option, then, merely states that candidates make mistakes; it does not assess what they are trying to do.

The prediction of this null hypothesis, then, as shown in figure 2.5, is a random distribution of differences between candidates (save, again, for party sorting). There would be no systematic differences between candidate positions across different levels of actual probability of winning for either candidate. Positions that embody noninstrumental preferences of the candidates cannot be distinguished from positions intended to maximize probability of winning but taken based upon inaccurate or incomplete information about voter preferences. And the noninstrumental preferred positions of parties likewise cannot be distinguished from the noninstrumental preferred positions of candidates. This null hypothesis remains a potential rejoinder to Downs, but it is still somewhat atheoretical and also seems rather unlikely.

Building a Case for the Expressive Campaign

The median voter model has often been reduced to a mere caricature in political science literature—not necessarily by spatial modelers, but by those who seek an offhand means of explaining the inevitable outcome of policy debates. There is widespread empirical debate, however, about whether it fulfills its most basic function, that of describing electoral outcomes. The sequential positioning alternatives I outline above provide an explanation for why its predictions so seldom come to pass, and they do so without disputing the internal logic of the model or the empirical fact that successful politicians do appear to capture a centrist position.

The median voter model has also been bedeviled by the accusation that it provides few incentives for those on the extremes of political debate to become active in politics at all—despite empirical evidence that they frequently do become involved, and often shape, policy debates. As Jane Mansbridge (1986, 3) notes, it is impossible “to dispense with ‘ideology’ in favor of practical political reasoning when the actors in the drama give their energies voluntarily, without pay or other material incentives.” Considering expected electoral outcome as a determinant of candidate strategy allows ideology to be reinserted into a median voter paradigm in its most pure form. It also allows candidates to be treated as political actors who share with voters, political activists, or interest-group members (see Salis-
bury 1970) a desire or ability to procure expressive benefits from activities that might not seem at first glance to be in their self-interest.

Considering candidates in this manner, however, brings about a rather discomforting scenario for those who would advocate “choices” rather than “echoes.” The sequential positioning alternatives suggest that we are given a choice precisely where having a choice matters the least—where the actual choices of voters are already preordained. We can expect divergence only where the stakes in taking a divergent position are relatively low. There are many candidates who would seem of interest to Diamond. They do not, however, win elections; if they were elected, they would no longer be of interest to him, and they exist, or at least they adopt divergent campaign positions, precisely because they are unlikely to win election.

Of these alternatives, the expressive campaign seems not only to have the most empirical backing, given what we know about American political parties and American elections; it also would seem to grow as a phenomenon in American politics with increases in the incumbency advantage, and it has substantial consequences for the choices voters are given by candidates. In the next four chapters I subject the above alternatives to both quantitative and qualitative testing. Because the actual estimates candidates make of their probability of winning are subjective, it is impossible to conclusively identify candidates’ motivations from replication of the hypothetical scatterplots shown in the figures in this chapter. Seeking to replicate these graphs does, however, enable us to test (and, as I show, to discard) the median voter conception and the null hypothesis for elections featuring an incumbent and a challenger. In chapter 3 I utilize scaled issue position data for 1996 House of Representatives candidates to assess the degree of responsive position taking (or election-seeking behavior) in these campaigns. In the following chapters I present qualitative evidence drawn from interviews with over sixty congressional candidates to gauge the degree of information, strategic behavior, and party influence in these campaigns. These interviews form the core of my argument for the prevalence of expressive campaigning in congressional campaigns. The discussion in this chapter provides the theoretical backing for seeking to understand the expressive campaign. Once we have studied its existence in American politics, as I seek to do in the subsequent chapters of this book, we can begin to assess the practical and normative implications of the fact that ideology becomes prominent only in losing causes. In doing so, we are able to identify implications of this type of campaigning for both the formal study of elections and for the study of congressional candidates.