CHAPTER 3

Incumbents and Challengers Compared

In order to provide evidence for the expressive campaigning theory outlined in chapter 2, it is necessary to demonstrate four things:

1. Challengers and incumbents employ different strategies in choosing issue positions. Throughout chapter 2 I assume that incumbents seek a median position. Only in the median voter theory, however, do all challengers seek a median position. In each of the others, challengers employ other strategies.

2. Challengers know where the electorate’s median is, where the incumbent stands, and what their probability of winning is. That is, challengers have information about voter preferences or, at a minimum, they could have access to this information if they chose to seek it. Information about voter preferences is not prohibitively costly for challengers. A finding in support of this proposition, in conjunction with evidence that challengers do take positions according to a different logic than incumbents, would establish the plausibility of a claim that challengers take positions out of a desire to maximize their own, or their party’s, expressive utility rather than taking positions they erroneously believe will help them win or get as many votes as possible.

3. Candidates with a low probability of winning adopt noncentrist positions for their expressive value. That is, they take positions based on their beliefs about what is right rather than based on what they think voters want. Support for this argument would provide positive support for the expressive campaigning theory, instead of merely disproving other alternatives.

4. Political parties either do not or cannot compel position taking. That is, we need evidence that candidates are taking positions that they, as individuals, feel are right rather than adopting the party’s message.
The first of these propositions can be demonstrated in a relatively straightforward manner using data on the positions of candidates in different types of districts and races. The second, third, and fourth propositions depend more heavily on candidates’ subjective assessments of their strategic choices, and therefore these propositions must be demonstrated in a more qualitative, interview-based manner. In this chapter I provide evidence in support of the proposition that incumbents and challengers differ in their position-taking strategies, and I then outline the design of the research I conducted to establish the second, third, and fourth of these propositions. Each of the subsequent three chapters is concerned with one of the remaining propositions.

Measuring Candidates’ Issue Positions

In order to test candidates’ responsiveness to voter preferences, it is necessary to develop proxy measurements for candidates’ policy positions and their beliefs about their probability of winning. That is, it is necessary to look at measurable outputs of incumbent and nonincumbent candidates’ campaigns before we explore their campaigns in detail. In this chapter I regress a scaled measure of self-reported candidate issue positions for all major-party 1996 U.S. House of Representatives candidates on past presidential vote share for each candidate’s party in the district. These data demonstrate that a majority of incumbents follow a median voter strategy, while nonincumbent candidates are much less likely to tailor their issue positions to the voting habits of their district. The data also demonstrate that there are significant differences in the issue positioning strategies of incumbents and nonincumbents within each party—differences that are due in large part to a lack of responsive positions on the part of the 1994 freshman Republicans.

Both of these measures are proxies for candidates’ overall ideological stance and candidates’ probability of winning. These proxies enable us to use commonly available information to address the behavior of congressional candidates as a group. They do not establish any causal mechanism—that is, they do not allow us to discern why candidates took any particular positions—but they do provide a starting point for exploring candidates’ reasons and motives in taking positions in their campaigns.

Studies of nonincumbent candidates’ issue positions have been handicapped in the past by the lack of a uniform measurement device. The most common means of placing incumbents on a liberal/conservative scale is an
index of their voting records. Such scales range from the relatively straightforward addition of votes conducted by interest groups to DW-NOMINATE and other more complicated devices created by political scientists. Any scale of this sort will not truly be a means of measuring positions, however, since it does not account for intensity of preferences and, especially in the case of interest group ratings, because it may not consider a representative sample of members’ votes. Several of these scales, particularly the ratings of ideological groups, as opposed to groups with a single issue focus or a limited range of concerns, do provide a means of comparing incumbent members to each other on a left-right continuum. Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) ratings are perhaps the scaling devices most commonly used by political scientists, although they are at times problematic.1

Because they have no voting record, however, no such easily accessible scaling device exists for nonincumbents. The closest we can come to approximating such ideological scales, then, is to survey the candidates. For issue position data in this chapter I have used the 1996 Time/Congressional Quarterly Candidate Survey.2 In this survey, the text of which is provided in the appendix to this chapter, candidates were asked to respond to thirteen yes/no questions about their views on legislation considered by the 104th Congress.3 Responses to these questions can be scored in a manner similar to the scoring of interest groups. For questions on this survey which showed a liberal/conservative split—that is, a majority of Democrats were on one side and a majority of Republicans were on the other—I coded each response 1 (a “liberal” response) if it was the answer given by the majority of Democrats and 0 if it was the answer given by the majority of Republicans. As I further explain later in this chapter, eleven of the thirteen survey questions could be coded in this manner.

To compute individual candidates’ scores, I divided the number of “liberal” responses by the total number of responses to devise a “liberalism quotient” (LQ) which ranges from 0 for the most conservative set of responses to 1 for the most liberal set of responses. The LQ scores for incumbent candidates are highly correlated with the incumbents’ 1995 ADA scores (R² = .955; N = 377). To compute distances between candidates within districts, I constructed a “liberalism quotient differential” (LQD) by calculating the absolute value of the difference between the two candidates’ scores, excluding questions which were not answered by both candidates. Use of the LQD helps to skirt the thorny issue of computing a median position for the district. It is, I argue, a safe assumption that where the LQD is low, both candidates are moving toward the district’s median, however liberal or conservative the district may be.
There are problems to confront, however, in interpreting these scores. Most importantly, it is not possible to be certain that the scoring accurately reflects the image the candidates choose to present to the voters or the perception that voters have of the candidates. A sample I have collected of the nonincumbent candidates’ campaign literature concentrates on very few of the issues raised in the *Time/Congressional Quarterly* questions, and several issues not addressed at all in the survey receive substantial attention in the candidates’ literature. The inability of these data to address the issues candidates choose to present is an important failing, which I shall consider later in this chapter. Failure to address voter perceptions is somewhat less relevant. It is the candidates’ perceptions of what they should emphasize and how they should campaign that matter in my theory, not what part of the message voters receive. The fact that most nonincumbents’ positions are less well known than those of the incumbent and the possibility that incumbents can often distort the public’s beliefs about their challengers actually illustrate the first-mover advantage so many incumbents have.

In addition, not all candidates responded to all of the survey questions. Some failed to do so because they were not asked all of the questions; four separate versions of the survey exist, in which either eight, ten, twelve, or thirteen of the thirteen questions were asked. Other candidates chose not to respond to the survey at all (N = 73, 8.4 percent) while still others responded to some questions and failed to respond to others. I excluded questions to which candidates did not respond. The LQ and LQD indexes were constructed by dividing by the number of responses given, not the number of questions asked, leaving out those four candidates who had responded to less than half of the questions.

To measure probability of winning I use the percentage of the two-party presidential vote won in the district by the presidential nominee of the candidate’s party in the most recent election, with the intuition that a district evenly split in presidential voting should be evenly split in congressional voting. This is, of course, often not the case, but I use this measure because it is one of the few pieces of information that is easily available to candidates of all resource levels and across all districts before they begin their campaigns.

There are other alternatives for measuring probability of winning, but each is lacking. Any measure used here must be available before the campaign begins; hence, commonly used estimates made during the campaign, such as the *Cook Report* or *Congressional Quarterly* competitiveness ratings, are not applicable. Other measures do not exist for all districts. Opinion polls might be obtainable for some districts, but clearly not for
all. We can acquire campaign finance data for all candidates, but there is no clear relationship between candidate spending and probability of winning, nor does fundraising precede assessments of viability (see Herrnson 2000, 229).

All candidates, however, can be presumed to have access to records of past voting in their districts. Even the poorest challenger can easily find out the incumbent’s previous margins of victory and district trends in voting in presidential, senatorial, and gubernatorial elections. There are certainly other, more idiosyncratic means that candidates use to gauge their chances, yet previous vote margins are pieces of information that all candidates can obtain easily, and they are the only probability of winning variables that are easily generalizable and quantifiable. Of these measures, presidential voting is the only measure available for all districts (it solves the problem of interpreting uncontested incumbents in previous elections) and easily interpreted by candidates. Because I consider the 1996 House races in this chapter, I use both the most recent election—that of 1992—and, because of problems interpreting the effects of Ross Perot’s third-party candidacy, I also use the 1988 presidential vote in the district (adjusted for redistricting).

With these two measures, the LQ index as a measurement of issue positions and past presidential voting as a proxy for candidates’ (subjective) probability of winning, we can thus proceed to looking at trends in the ideological positions of House candidates from 1996.

Differences between Incumbents and Challengers

The first, most basic distinction to be made in looking at these data is between incumbents and nonincumbents. Note that I include open-seat candidates here, insofar as open-seat candidates can be construed as also evaluating their chance of winning using the variables noted above. Although the competitiveness of open-seat races varies, of course, the equal footing and simultaneous position taking in open-seat races should lead open-seat candidates to be as responsive to voter preferences, if not more so, than challengers, if the sequential positioning alternatives of chapter 2 are to hold.

Before analyzing the scaled data, however, it is worthwhile to look at the individual questions in the Time/Congressional Quarterly survey. As table 3.1 shows, each of the survey questions identifies an issue on which the parties are polarized; there is significant difference in party means (p < .001) on all questions except the question of gays in the military. There are also, however, significant differences between incumbents and nonincumbents of the same party on many of these issues. These differences enable
us to see whether challengers adopt more centrist strategies on the whole than do incumbents, and they also enable us to see where—on which issues—such moderation is taking place. On two issues, gays in the military
and EPA restrictions, the differences are so sharp that I have excluded the questions from the overall index, thus constructing an LQ index with a maximum of eleven questions, guided by the hypothesis that incumbents and nonincumbents understood the questions differently. The far-right column of table 3.1 also lists correlations between the individual question responses and candidates’ LQ scores, and it further shows that these two question responses are atypical. Although the NAFTA question also exhibits a somewhat low correlation with candidates’ overall average, responses to that question do break down in the expected partisan fashion, so I have kept that question in the revised LQ index.

In table 3.1 we do see preliminary evidence that some challengers are behaving responsively. Insofar as Republican nonincumbents tend to be running in more liberal districts than their incumbent fellow partisans, and vice versa, it is to be expected that nonincumbents as a whole will take more moderate positions than will incumbents. The fact that incumbents represent these districts to begin with means that the median will be closer to their positions than to those of nonincumbents; in other words, there is a sorting mechanism in these districts, either on the part of the voters, who chose the candidate closest to their views when they first elected the incumbent, or on the part of the candidates, who choose to run as the candidate of the party which captures their views most closely. Nonincumbents should, in more cases than not, have further to move to capture the median than should incumbents.

On three issues, NAFTA, aid to Russia, and welfare reform, Democratic nonincumbents as a group were significantly (p < .05) more conservative than were Democratic incumbents. Republican nonincumbents as a group were more liberal than were Republican incumbents on Medicare, Bosnia, the Family and Medical Leave Act, and NAFTA. Given the prominence of many of these issues in the presidential campaign and in the national media, these results are as an observer might predict—nonincumbents might be expected to compromise on high-salience issues more readily than on low-salience issues. Less intuitively, however, Democratic nonincumbents were more liberal than were Democratic incumbents on the Family and Medical Leave Act, and Republican nonincumbents were more conservative than Republican incumbents on gun control and aid to Russia. Finally, nonincumbents of both parties were, unsurprisingly, more in favor of term limits than were incumbents.

Figures 3.1a and b show the relationship between incumbent and nonincumbent candidates’ LQ scores and these candidates’ parties’ presidential vote in the district in 1992 and 1988. As suggested by ADA scores for the years surrounding the 1996 elections, the parties are highly polarized; there are relatively few candidates in the middle of the distribution. There
is little overlap between Democrats and Republicans, and there is even less overlap between Democratic and Republican incumbents. In fact, there was only one House race in the nation in 1996 where the candidates actually converged on the LQD index. This polarization certainly indicates that candidates do not actually converge, but it is still possible to note movement by the candidates in accordance with district partisanship; candidates can fail to actually converge while still seeking to compromise on selected issues (see Wright and Berkman 1986 for a similar argument regarding Senate candidates).
In this figure, strategic differences between nonincumbents and incumbents are evident, as are differences in strategic behavior between the parties. We should expect incumbents to become more conservative as their districts become more conservative if incumbents are seeking out a median position for their district. Democratic incumbents clearly are doing this. Whether Republican incumbents are doing so is less evident. For both parties’ incumbents, the outliers are important; at a minimum, the small number of points at the upper end of the distribution of LQ scores for Republicans and the points at the lower end of the LQ score distribution for Democrats all are for incumbents who represent districts where their party’s presidential candidate performed poorly.

Nonincumbents, however, are only expected to behave responsively as a group in the median voter model. The lack of a pattern for nonincum-
bents here does not establish any particular set of strategic choices for this group of candidates, but it does indicate that incumbents are far more concerned with reflecting their constituents’ preferences than are nonincumbents. I did generate scatterplots for the LQD scores for each district, but few of these show any pattern, further indicating a lack of vote seeking or election seeking on the part of most challengers. The majority of races with an LQD of .20 or less occur in districts without strong partisan leanings, yet it is hard to draw any conclusion from the remainder of the observations.

In figure 3.1 I provide OLS regression lines for reference. As is evident in the plots, however, regressions for both parties will be biased and inconsistent because each party’s distribution of LQ scores is censored. Because the LQ scores range from 0 to 1, the Democratic scores will have upper censoring at 1, while the Republican scores will have lower censoring at 0. That is, we should see a large number of particularly extreme LQ scores for incumbents in safe seats for their party. Accordingly, in table 3.2 I present bivariate tobit results measuring the impact of 1992 and 1988 district presidential vote for each of the classes of candidates. The reader should note, however, that any linear equations here will be at the mercy

### Table 3.2. Tobit Estimates of LQ Scores by 1988 and 1992 District Presidential Vote

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Democrats</th>
<th>Democratic Incumbent</th>
<th>Democratic Nonincumbent</th>
<th>All Republicans</th>
<th>Republican Incumbent</th>
<th>Republican Nonincumbent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1988 Party Presidential Vote</td>
<td>.0061 ** (0.0007)</td>
<td>.0099 ** (0.0011)</td>
<td>.0032 * (0.0014)</td>
<td>-.0045 ** (0.0007)</td>
<td>-.0053 ** (0.0018)</td>
<td>-.0038 ** (0.0010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.537 ** (.034)</td>
<td>.373 ** (.061)</td>
<td>.663 ** (.057)</td>
<td>.436 ** (.041)</td>
<td>.477 ** (.112)</td>
<td>.407 ** (.050)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean X</td>
<td>46.84</td>
<td>55.30</td>
<td>40.66</td>
<td>53.92</td>
<td>60.76</td>
<td>46.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LL Ratio</td>
<td>66.86</td>
<td>26.58</td>
<td>46.00</td>
<td>40.73</td>
<td>-2.33</td>
<td>-44.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992 Party Presidential Vote</td>
<td>.0060 ** (.0007)</td>
<td>.0082 ** (.0010)</td>
<td>.0026</td>
<td>-.0052 ** (.0009)</td>
<td>-.0031</td>
<td>-.0053 ** (.0014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.558 ** (.032)</td>
<td>.438 ** (.053)</td>
<td>.690 ** (.056)</td>
<td>.388 ** (.038)</td>
<td>.286 ** (.088)</td>
<td>.397 ** (.047)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean X</td>
<td>44.41</td>
<td>52.80</td>
<td>38.28</td>
<td>37.64</td>
<td>42.71</td>
<td>31.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LL Ratio</td>
<td>66.63</td>
<td>26.74</td>
<td>46.00</td>
<td>36.88</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td>44.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p < .01  *p < .05  
Presidential vote is measured on a 0<->100 scale for each party. Standard errors are in parentheses.
of the outliers. That is, the phenomenon of “clumping” in the middle will give the small number of outliers on either side tremendous leverage in any equation.

Here again, there clearly is a significant relationship between LQ scores and district presidential voting in this table, but the differences between types are instructive. Just as our scatterplots, when looked at individually, show a strong trend on the part of incumbents (particularly Democratic incumbents) and a seemingly random spread for nonincumbents, so in the equations do we see substantial differences between incumbents and nonincumbents. In both parties, incumbents take positions with more regard to voter preferences than do challengers, particularly in the Democratic case. Democratic incumbents and Republican challengers show some convergence as districts become more conservative, but this is due to the responsiveness of Democratic incumbents to district preferences, not to compromise by their Republican challengers. Republican nonincumbents also shift their positions according to the presidential voting in their district, but they do so far less rapidly than do their incumbent foes. Democratic nonincumbents are barely taking positions responsively at all when we consider the 1988 vote, and their coefficient for 1992 presidential vote is not significant. Republican nonincumbents show slightly more responsiveness to district preferences than do Democratic nonincumbents.

One striking finding in this table, however, is the lack of responsiveness on the part of Republican incumbents to presidential voting in their districts. The outliers for Republicans in figure 3.1 do show that the most liberal Republican incumbents do represent districts that are less than 50 percent Republican. True to their reputation, first-term Republicans (the class of 1994) are driving this difference. Figure 3.2 demonstrates that much of the apparent randomness in district comparisons for Democrats challenging Republicans occurred because members of the freshman Republican class were on average more conservative than the districts they represented. Challenges to nonfreshman Republicans follow a path in which candidates move closer to each other as the partisanship of the district tightens. An analogous tobit estimate to those above for nonfreshman Republicans (not shown) shows a coefficient of -.0110 for 1988 party presidential vote and -.0075 for 1992, both significant at p<.01 and both larger than that of Democratic incumbents. The coefficient for freshman Republicans was insignificant. Districts held by nonfreshman Republicans that are closest in terms of presidential voting are also among the districts featuring the closest set of issue positions between the candidates; they are the only districts where there appears to be a pattern to the LQD scores,
although the convergence here is driven more by incumbents than by challengers.

This lack of responsiveness on the part of many first-term Republicans is important for assessing challenger strategies. It means that many of the more competitive Democratic challengers for 1996 may not need to ape their opponents’ positions to do well. They may be among the fortunate few in the sequential positioning alternatives who have a range of winning positions among which to choose. In any year, there may be a crop of challengers who have this option, and so it is important to note that while convergence is possible in competitive races, races can be competitive without requiring convergence.
Talking to the Candidates

These data are a means of assessing outcomes, not incentives; that is, they enable us to identify patterns in the positions candidates take, but they provide no direct insight into why candidates took the positions they staked out. Nonetheless, they do provide a preliminary answer to the question of whether there is a rational choice logic to candidate position taking. They enable us to make some basic determinations about the accuracy of the argument I presented in chapter 2.

Most obviously, these data do provide evidence of responsiveness to voter preferences on the part of incumbents. Not only is this unsurprising, but it accords with each of the alternatives I discussed. The only particularly surprising feature of incumbent position taking was that there was an identifiable class among incumbents—namely, first-term Republicans—who did not follow this strategy. The real test of the theory, however, is in the positions of the challengers. Here, we find scant support for a median voter strategy among challengers in the aggregate.

Nonincumbents do sway somewhat with the partisanship of their districts, yet not nearly to the degree that incumbents do. The only way that we could reconcile the median voter model with the data would be to assert that challengers, on average, have extraordinarily incomplete or inaccurate information about voter preferences, that they are, to put it bluntly, quite wrong about what voters want. For some candidates this may be true, but this seems like an unrealistic claim based upon the easily accessible voting histories of each district. The small sample of open-seat races, in which more of the candidates should have relatively high, and equal, levels of information, does little to confirm the median voter model.

The two sequential positioning alternatives provide reasons for nonincumbent candidates to take positions different from those predicted by the median voter model. If candidates are seeking to be reliable messengers of their party, one would expect that in races featuring an incumbent, the ideological distance between candidates would decrease as the challenger’s a priori probability of winning increases; where the challenger faces a low probability of winning, challengers will adhere to the preferred positions of their party. The most important candidates to investigate here are those who are running long-shot campaigns. Are long-shot candidates more ideologically coherent than more serious challengers? In the aggregate, the answer appears to be no. There is certainly consistent polarization in all races, but if long shots were consistently adopting their party’s preferred positions, the slope of the regression lines in figure 3.1 and the estimates in table 3.2 would actually be the reverse of what they are—that is, Republi-
can nonincumbents would actually become more liberal as their districts grew more conservative, and the converse would be true for Democrats. There is no evidence for this in the data.

In the case of the expressive campaign, issue distance should decrease as a priori probability of winning increases for the challenger, but attempts to draw a neat regression line will be complicated by the lack of order to long-shot candidates’ campaigns. That is, the variance for uncompetitive races should be much greater than for the more competitive ones. Here, we would expect that candidates who are unlikely to win run for a plethora of reasons and espouse a variety of ideological positions, while candidates who believe they have a good chance of winning are more often than not seasoned politicians who are accustomed to tailoring their positions to make this belief a reality. The unsystematic nature of challenger positions lends some support to this notion, but the question in distinguishing between this alternative and the others is where to draw the line between adherence to party positions and individually chosen expressive positions on the one hand, and between expressive positions and random variation on the other. The fact that challengers are less likely to adopt moderate positions than are incumbents does indicate that either challengers do not have the information necessary to make informed decisions about voter preferences, or that they are more inclined to let their own personal views stand in the way of changing positions than are incumbents. If the latter holds true, the expressive campaigning theory provides a rational choice articulation for this finding.

The data presented here are meant to demonstrate the plausibility of different theoretical conceptions of why candidates run for office and how they view their issue competition with their opponent. Ultimately, however, there is no substitute for exploring the actual decisions made within the campaigns of different types of candidates. Many candidates with whom I have spoken characterized themselves in a far different way than one might characterize them after reading a summary of the positions they took in the *Time/Congressional Quarterly* Candidate Survey, and many also had assessments of their opponents’ strengths and weaknesses that went far beyond what presidential vote totals for the district might suggest. As one candidate told me,

> You miss a lot of things in those statistics. There are more than two sides to most of those issues. NAFTA, for example, is more complicated than “are you for or against it?” And some of those issues just aren’t relevant—I mean, how many candidates really cared that much one way or the other about aid to Russia, unless you were running in a district with a
lot of Russian immigrants. You pick the two or three issues you think are going to matter in the election, but the others, you just say what you think when people ask you and don’t bring them up the rest of the time.

The candidate in question here was indeed a strong candidate, as election results showed; he was the beneficiary of a substantial independent advocacy campaign, but he was unsuccessful in defeating an incumbent who, despite his conservative voting record, had successfully cultivated an image as a moderate, responsive candidate in a district that leaned Democratic (in his opponent’s words, voters viewed him “more like a city councilman than a congressman”). We might develop our own means of categorizing this election, and the strategies of the candidates in it, just as we might do so for any individual election in which we could talk extensively with the candidates and others involved in each race. Needless to say, such categorizations would sometimes be at odds with the conclusions we might draw about the same elections from the data I have just reviewed.

In order to build upon the above findings, however, while still keeping in mind the skepticism of this candidate, I conducted a series of interviews with nonincumbent candidates from the 1996 elections. I spoke with these candidates about their assessment of voter preferences, their issue strategies, and their relationships with their parties. Before I turn to these interviews, I summarize the interview process below.

The Candidates

During the summer of 1996 I contacted fifty-seven nonincumbent House candidates. I sent letters to all major-party challengers and open-seat candidates in Illinois, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin informing them of my study and requesting their cooperation. After the election, I waited three weeks for the candidates’ lives to calm down, and I then began my interviews. Between November 1996 and July 1997, I interviewed forty-nine of these candidates in person and another three by telephone. Only five of the original fifty-seven candidates that I sought to contact could not be located or declined to be interviewed. These five candidates are relatively similar to the candidates who were interviewed; the fifty-two candidates interviewed provide a relatively complete picture of the political circumstances of their respective states. These candidates are drawn from fifty-six districts; there were four open seats and three incumbents without major-
party opposition in these states in 1996. A full list of candidates interviewed is provided at the end of this book.

Seven candidates, including all six victorious ones, referred me to their campaign directors for my interviews. While speaking to the campaign directors may obscure some of the candidates’ subjective appraisals of their campaigns, in many cases these interviews may have provided me with more information about strategic decisions and the work that went on in the campaign than talking to the candidates would have. I have treated campaign directors’ comments with caution, but I have retained these for analysis in the subsequent chapters.

Waiting until after the election poses some validity problems, as candidates may revise their beliefs about what their chances of winning were and why they made particular strategic decisions. John Kingdon (1966, 23) refers to a “congratulation/rationalization effect,” in which candidates adjust their thinking after the election in often unrealistic ways. I felt that, because most of these candidates were bound to lose, they would be far more candid with me after the election than during their campaigns, and that I myself would ultimately be the judge of whether candidates were being unrealistic in their judgments on their campaigns. Although many candidates appeared to have taken their losses quite hard, and a few had indeed developed means of rationalizing the election outcomes, I detected very few comments that seemed an obvious attempt to rearrange the facts.

Virtually all of these candidates were extremely forthcoming. Following the recommendations of literature on elite interviewing (see Converse and Schuman 1974; Fenno 1990; Jones 1962; Robinson 1960) I administered a relatively open-ended questionnaire, and I did not adhere rigorously to a questionnaire text. Interviews ranged from half an hour to over two hours.

**Representativeness of the Candidates**

For analytical convenience, my discussion of these interviews in the following chapters breaks the candidates up into three types. Of these fifty-two candidates, only six were elected to Congress, four of whom were open-seat candidates. This is typical of 1996 House campaigns, in which there was a 94.5 percent incumbent reelection rate. Along with these six, I term another eight candidates “very competitive” candidates. These are candidates who either garnered above 45 percent of the vote or were targeted for extensive support by their national party congressional organizations. Throughout my analysis, I consider both the winners and the
narrow losers in the “very competitive” category. Twenty-one candidates ran what I term “somewhat competitive” races, in which they either received between 35 and 45 percent of the vote or, failing to do that, raised and spent over $100,000. An additional seventeen candidates ran relatively underfinanced, long-shot campaigns which resulted in less than 35 percent of the votes and less than $100,000 raised. In each of these cases, the candidates are relatively evenly distributed among the four states; Minnesota is the only state of the four whose congressional delegation did not change in 1996.

These competitiveness distinctions break with the party presidential vote indicator I have used thus far in this chapter, in part because that is a somewhat unsatisfactory indicator of competitiveness and in part because the use of these three broad categories makes comparison of candidates in a group of this size more meaningful. While the categories provide a convenient means of analyzing different classes of candidates, the divisions between them may appear somewhat arbitrary to some. As I seek to show in the subsequent chapters, however, these three categories do quite accurately capture different types of candidacies in terms of ability to acquire information, beliefs about the likely outcome of the election, and the involvement of party organizations in the campaigns. These distinctions are also important insofar as we have built-in comparisons or controls. That is, although the focus of this book is on expressive campaigning, a phenomenon most prevalent in races where one candidate has a low chance of winning, it is important to have candidates who we would not expect to be conducting expressive campaigns—candidates who can reasonably expect to win—among the interviewees in order to serve as a control group.

These are also admittedly ex post facto definitions of candidate types; that is, implicit in them is the assumption that the competitiveness of a candidate was a determinant, not a result, of candidate finances or of the individual viewpoints recounted below. To support this assumption, I refer the reader to the very high correlation of .875 between incumbent vote share in 1994 and incumbent vote share in 1996. Incumbent vote share in past races, as I have already argued, is not in itself an accurate means of measuring challengers’ subjective beliefs about victory, but surely the range in which those numbers fall is a more relevant concern of candidates than other candidates’ vote share. The categories I have chosen allow for variance which might be attributed to the candidates’ actual campaigning skills, yet this variance is assumed to be, in most cases, rather small. These categories are based upon the notion that there is some satisfying mechanism in congressional voting; where an incumbent has received, for example, over 65 percent of the vote in the past election, this vote share
indicates satisfaction of the voters with their member of Congress and a reluctance to consider a challenger's positions no matter how skillfully the challenger, or the challenger's party, runs a campaign. Given not only the high correlation between incumbent vote shares from one election to the next, but also the reluctance of the national parties to pour resources into campaigns against popular incumbents, this seems a reasonable assumption, or at least an assumption that the behavior of the parties is unlikely to disprove.

As table 3.3 demonstrates, the group of candidates with whom I spoke roughly reflects national patterns. These candidates raised, on average, less money than did other nonincumbent candidates, yet they were comparable in terms of their ideology, their party affiliation, their vote percentage, and the competitiveness of their elections. The candidates I interviewed were somewhat more liberal, on average, than were other candidates. This is partially a function of the larger proportion of Democrats among my interviewees, and it may be partially a function of the more liberal politics of the four states in which I chose to conduct interviews.

In part because I define competitiveness using financial resources, differences between categories in financial expenditures are quite large. Among all candidates, the average amount spent by long shots was $27,975; for somewhat competitive candidates, $371,317; and among very competitive candidates, $729,169. Among the candidates I interviewed, the corresponding figures were $26,042 for long shots, $267,091

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Table 3.3. Comparisons of Candidates Interviewed with All Nonincumbent 1996 Candidates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
<th>Winners</th>
<th>Long-Shots</th>
<th>Somewhat Competitive</th>
<th>Very Competitive</th>
<th>Median Receipts</th>
<th>Median LQ Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Races (N = 469)</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>39.9%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>$201,710</td>
<td>.580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-Shots (N = 72)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Competitive (N = 161)</td>
<td>39.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Competitive (N = 187)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Receipts (N = 121)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) Competitiveness is measured as defined above—long-shot candidates received less than 35% of the vote and raised under $100,000; somewhat competitive candidates either received 35% to 45% of the vote or, failing to reach this mark, raised over $100,000; very competitive candidates received over 45% of the vote.

(b) Figures are taken from the 1996 year-end FEC reports. Candidates who raise less than $5,000 are not required to report; any unreported campaign figures were thus coded as $5,000. Three of the 33 nonreporters were among the candidates interviewed.
for somewhat competitive candidates, and $608,488 for very competitive candidates. The means for very competitive candidates are lower among the candidates interviewed because of differences at the very top of the spending hierarchy; only one of the candidates I interviewed spent over $1 million, while twenty-seven nonincumbent candidates nationwide did so, with two spending over $2.5 million.

**The 1996 Elections in Context**

One area in which the selection of candidates is not representative, of course, is timing. Ideally, a thorough test of candidate strategy would include a truly random cross-sectional sample of candidates drawn from several different election periods. In chapter 7 I discuss similarities between a selection of candidates from the 2000 races from several different states and the 1996 candidates considered in the next three chapters. For the time being, however, a brief consideration of some of the potential peculiarities of the 1996 candidates is in order.

First, one might argue that 1996 is anomalous, that the congressional candidates of 1996 were different from the average candidate in another year. While certainly every set of elections is unique, 1996 is in many ways typical of congressional elections of the past twenty years. It was certainly not as anomalous as was 1994.

As is the norm in presidential election years, the party of the victorious presidential candidate gained seats in the House. The Democrats gained only nine House seats, however, and they remained in the minority. As was the case in 1984 and 1972, one might contend that the incumbent president had some effect on congressional races, but this effect was nowhere near as great as the effects of presidential coattails had been in the past. The average Republican incumbent outspent the average Democratic incumbent, and challengers were outspent by approximately a seven-to-one ratio. According to FEC year-end reports, the median incumbent spent $538,845 to the median challenger’s $77,978. The 94.5 percent incumbent reelection rate for 1996, then, is hardly surprising. In this respect, 1996 was not by any means an unusual election, and its candidates can be assumed to have behaved similarly to House candidates in other recent elections.

One way in which the candidates of 1996 were unusual is that there were more of them, and they may have garnered more attention than the average crop of congressional candidates. Nineteen ninety-six was a year of particularly heated competition in several ways. As the first year in which the new Republican majority had to defend its seats, both parties
felt they had a good chance of holding majority status in the House following the election. Certainly it had been many years since both parties had been uncertain who would organize the chamber following the election. Early in the campaign, the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO identified several vulnerable Republicans against whom to concentrate their efforts. The lion’s share of media attention in 1996 went to the AFL-CIO’s advertising campaign. Jacobson (1999) has argued that the AFL-CIO campaign had little effect on the overall outcome of the race; he attributes this not to flaws of the AFL-CIO’s strategy but to a lack of quality candidates put forward by the Democrats; only 22.1 percent of Democratic challengers had prior political experience, as compared to the postwar average of 25.3 percent.

Despite this low number of experienced candidates, however, it appears that the parties did place a premium on fielding candidates in as many districts as possible. In 1996, 3.2 percent of House seats were uncontested, a decline from 17.4 percent in 1994 and a low in the post–World War II years (see table 1.2). Nineteen ninety-two was the only other election in which the percentage of uncontested seats fell below 10 percent. Because we know that challengers did not fare better than usual, the only conclusions one can draw from this fact are that there are likely to have been a higher number of long-shot candidates and perhaps a higher number of recruited candidates than normal.

Thus, 1996 has some unique features, but it seems that these features are likely to have played a role in only a small number of elections. It is a year in which competition was in some regards more heated than it had been in previous elections, but this fact actually makes 1996 an appealing year to study rather than a particularly poor case from which to generalize. In the subsequent chapters I note unusual features of the election, but these seem few enough that they do not pose a significant problem for generalization.

State Political Culture and Historical Background

A second area in which these candidates are not representative is, of course, geography. I found that in order to conduct successful interviews, I needed to have relatively extensive background knowledge about local politics. By choosing four neighboring states, I was able to follow candidates when they made comparisons to other candidates, or when they discussed local politicians and events. By choosing to interview all candidates in these states, I was able to gain an understanding of how the parties operated in each state and how geographical considerations determined cam-
campaign strategies. In chapter 7 I compare candidates in these states with candidates from four other states, and I find few ways in which my choice of states appears to affect my overall conclusions about expressive campaigning.

Within these four states, however, there is a great deal of variation. When put together, these states represent a microcosm of the nation both politically and demographically. All are large states with a rich political history. In terms of politics, the relatively balanced party competition in these states ensures that both parties are represented adequately in the study. Each state displays a level of volatility in elections great enough to qualify it as a relatively competitive two-party state, in each state both parties have shown in recent years that they can win at the state level, and voting in each state has generally followed national trends in presidential voting. Wright, Erikson, and McIver (1985) also demonstrate that these four states are all close to the mean in terms of voter ideology and partisanship.

Most importantly, it is clear that these states have a relative balance of power in their congressional delegations. There is within them, however, some volatility. “Safe” Republican districts in Minnesota, such as the Second and the Seventh Districts, had fallen into Democratic hands at the time of my 1996 study, although the Second is now Republican again. Minnesota actually had three of its eight districts change party hands in the 1990s. Likewise, in Wisconsin Republicans have proven competitive in Democratic areas such as the Second District, where Madison is located, which was held by a Republican from 1990 to 1998. Ohio shows a slow trend toward the Republicans, although this may be due in part to the 1992 redistricting, which prompted the defeat of one relocated Democrat and the retirements of four others in the more Democratic, northeastern part of the state. Illinois is the most consistent of the four states; redistricting in both 1992 and 2002 seems to have affected both parties equally, and the only unusual change in district control is that of the Fifth District, formerly held by Dan Rostenkowski but temporarily in Republican hands as of the time of this study. Only in Wisconsin has one party maintained control of both Senate seats for the past decade, and only in Ohio has the governorship remained in one party’s hands.

Presidential voting in the four states is also not strikingly far from the national average. Illinois has opted for the winning candidate in nine of the past eleven elections, Ohio has missed only one, and Wisconsin has missed only four. Only Minnesota consistently runs more than three points away from the average; Minnesotans have voted more Democratic in general, but some of this disparity may be accounted for by the presence of
Minnesotans on the Democratic presidential ticket in five of the past ten elections.

As I show in chapter 6, the four states also allow us to analyze variations in party strength. Mayhew (1986, 66–77, 159–64) and Fenton (1966, 44–54, 194–218) concur about the strength of the political parties in the states considered here. Fenton divides the four states into issue-oriented (Minnesota and Wisconsin) and patronage-oriented (Ohio and Illinois) states. In his ratings of party strength by state, Mayhew rates Ohio and Illinois as strong-party states, while he classifies Wisconsin and Minnesota as weak-party states. Minnesota, it should be added, is the only one of the four states to have a relatively unconventional manner of nominating candidates. Party caucuses convene to endorse candidates, after which the party’s endorsed candidates must run in a primary; those candidates formally endorsed by the party may not wind up being the nominee of the party. The other state parties I consider here refrain from endorsing candidates until after the primary.

There is also significant demographic variation within each state and between the states. Each of these states is characterized by a push and pull between urban, suburban, and rural areas. The Illinois population is roughly evenly split between Chicago, the Chicago suburbs, and the more rural downstate area; the Democratic Chicago machine that once controlled Illinois politics no longer exerts much power over the rest of the state. Chicago continues to be among the most Democratic cities in the United States, while the Chicago suburbs continue to be among the most Republican regions of the country. The rural, “downstate” region is thus a battleground in state races. With the exception of the very southern tip of the state, which includes strongly Democratic cities such as Decatur, Cairo, and East St. Louis, in the remainder of Illinois both parties exhibit equal strength.

Ohio, which was strongly Republican early in the century, but which has at times had strong Democratic bases in rust-belt cities such as Cleveland, Akron, Canton, Youngstown, and Toledo, has also been characterized by urban/rural conflict. Twenty-six percent of the Ohio population lives in rural areas, but all of the major cities except for Columbus have shrunk dramatically over the past few decades as the steel industry and other manufacturing industries have declined (see Duncan and Nutting 1999, 1043; Barone, Cohen, and Ujifusa 2001, 1184). For most of the postwar years, Ohio had a predominantly Republican congressional delegation, with the few consistently Democratic seats located in the major industrial cities and in the primarily industrial counties of the north and northeast. Cincinnati and Columbus have during this time distinguished themselves as two of the most conservative of major American cities. The
Ohio delegation actual tilted toward the Democrats for a time in the 1970s and 1980s, but recent Republican gains have brought Ohio’s partisan balance back toward the Republican advantage of the 1950s and 1960s (see Diemer 1994).

Minnesota and Wisconsin are both more rural states than Ohio and Illinois. The population of the Minneapolis and St. Paul region is easily several times larger than any other city in the state, but there is somewhat less of a disparity in politics between the urban, suburban, and rural areas, in part because Minneapolis has never been the industrial center that Chicago and the larger Ohio cities are or once were, and in part for distinctive cultural reasons. The Twin Cities area and the northern part of Minnesota are strongly Democratic; the Twin Cities suburbs are somewhat more Republican; and the three southern Minnesota districts are, and have traditionally been, very conservative, primarily agricultural areas. These differences have often been attributed to Minnesota’s immigration patterns; much of northern Minnesota was originally settled by Scandinavian immigrants, while the southern part of the state was originally settled by German immigrants.

Wisconsin is the most rural of the four states. Although it does have one major industrial city, Milwaukee, the Milwaukee area has never had the size to be a focal point of state politics. The Republican Party has played a major role in Wisconsin politics since its first meeting in Ripon, Wisconsin. However, the policies advocated by Republicans in Wisconsin have at times been to the left even of most Democratic initiatives during the twentieth century.

For each of the quotes I use in subsequent chapters, I have appended the state name so that the reader may identify peculiarities of the individual state the respondent is from. With the exception of chapter 6, in which I explicitly consider party strength, I do not explicitly draw out state differences. In the cases of information acquisition and issue strategies, there should be little reason to suppose these candidates to be particularly unrepresentative. In the area of party activities, I have sought to emphasize differences between the states, in the hope that the findings might be extrapolated to states with similar political cultures.

**Listening to the Candidates**

The primary goal in my interviews, and in my discussion of the interviews, is to let the candidates speak for themselves. In presenting their comments on their campaigns and their campaign strategies, I do briefly note any methodological issues present in formulating questions or interpreting can-
The candidates’ comments, as well as several representative case studies, are arranged so as to draw finer and finer distinctions between the theoretical options I have outlined. In chapter 2 I presented a two-by-two table that I seek to address through the candidates’ comments. Earlier in this chapter I addressed the differences between incumbents and challengers and established the viability of exploring a campaign strategy and an issue strategy for nonincumbents that departs from what we know about incumbents’ campaigns. In chapter 4 I address the problem of information acquisition. I explore candidates’ use of public opinion data, voting trends, and other measures candidates might use to inform themselves of what their chances of victory were in their campaigns. In chapter 5 I explore the issue positions of the candidates and the reasons why they chose these positions. In this chapter the candidates frequently refer to a desire to diverge from the positions of their opponent even where doing so seems unlikely to improve their chances of victory. It is in this chapter that candidates’ forceful statements of their own policy beliefs and their separation of these beliefs from electoral calculations establish the prevalence of expressive campaigning in many of these races. Finally, in chapter 6 I present candidates’ comments on the role of their party—be it the national congressional campaign committee, the state party, the local party, or prominent leaders and party office-holders—in their campaigns. This chapter provides a qualification to my theory of expressive campaigning. It shows that political parties can encourage expressive campaigning, or they can exert pressure upon candidates either to take positions more akin to those of mainstream party members or to take election-oriented positions. That is, expressive campaigning takes root where parties practice a form of benign neglect in regard to many of their candidates. When parties take an interest in a campaign, election-oriented intervention is often unnecessary, insofar as candidates themselves recognize the value of election-oriented positions. Meanwhile, intervention aimed at producing a party-based campaign can often hurt candidates, or at least leave them unhappy with the results of their campaigns. In short, this chapter establishes the push-and-pull of the two sequential positioning alternatives, the expressive campaign and the party-based campaign.

We shall revisit the theoretical implications of these distinctions at the close of this book. Until then, let us turn to our nonincumbent candidates’
views on what they did in their campaigns and why they did what they did.

Appendix to Chapter 3: *Time/Congressional Quarterly* 1996 Congressional Candidate Survey

Questions and Coding

Clinton Budget: Would you have voted for the budget-reconciliation bill aimed at balancing the federal budget by fiscal year 2002? The bill had provisions reducing expected federal spending $894 billion over seven years, including major restraints on Medicare, Medicaid and welfare spending, and cutting expected tax revenue $245 billion. (1 = NO)

Medicare: Would you have voted for the bill to reduce expected Medicare spending $270 billion over seven years? (1 = NO)

B-2 Bomber: Would you have voted for the amendment to cut $493 million provided for continued production of the B-2 Stealth bombers? (1 = YES)

Term Limits: Would you have voted for the “term limits” constitutional amendment imposing a twelve-year lifetime limit on congressional tenure in either the House or the Senate? (1 = NO)

Partial-Birth Abortion: Would you have voted for the bill to ban so-called partial-birth abortions, in which the doctor removes the fetus’s brain tissue after bringing the fetus into the birth canal? Under the bill, doctors who perform the procedure could be subject to criminal and civil penalties. (1 = NO)

EPA: Would you have voted for the amendment striking seventeen provisions from a fiscal 1996 spending bill that funds the Environmental Protection Agency? The provisions would limit the EPA’s enforcement of certain environmental regulations. (1 = YES)

FMLA: Would you have voted for the Family and Medical Leave Act, which requires many businesses to provide workers up to twelve weeks of unpaid leave for the birth or adoption of a child or a medical emergency? (1 = YES)
Brady Bill: Would you have voted for the “Brady Bill,” which requires each would-be purchaser of a handgun to wait five days while local law-enforcement officials conduct a personal background check on the purchaser? (1 = YES)

Gays in the Military: Would you have voted for the amendment to allow the Pentagon to implement its “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, continuing the existing ban on known homosexuals in the military, but preventing military officials from asking about service members’ sexual orientation? (1 = NO)

Bosnia: Would you have voted for a bill to bar the use of federal money for the deployment of U.S. troops in Bosnia-Herzegovina? (1 = NO)

NAFTA: Would you have voted for legislation to implement the North American Free Trade Agreement, which links the United States, Canada, and Mexico in a free-trade zone and requires each country to eliminate numerous tariffs and trade barriers? (1 = NO)

Aid to Russia: Would you have voted for the foreign-spending bill that included $2.5 billion in direct aid for Russia and other former republics of the Soviet Union? (1 = YES)

Welfare: Would you have voted for the bill overhauling the federal welfare system, ending welfare as an entitlement, turning it into a block-grant program to be run by states and placing certain work and behavioral requirements on welfare recipients? (1 = NO)

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