CHAPTER 4

“It’s Not Like Rocket Science”: How Candidates Understand Public Opinion

As I outlined in the previous chapter, the second condition in my argument for the prevalence of expressive campaigning in congressional races is that challengers have, or at least are able to acquire, two different types of information. First of all, probability of winning is presumed to be a quantity that can be estimated relatively accurately by candidates. If the long-shot candidate does not know that he is a long shot, if he dramatically overestimates his chance of winning, we would expect him to take positions instrumentally, to adopt a median voter strategy which will have little observable effect upon his actual chance of winning. Conversely, if the very competitive candidate is unaware that he is in a position to win his election, he may not take the strategic positions that will help him to do so, and he may diminish his chance of winning. In each case, candidates are presumed to want to know which candidate the median voter prefers, and to what extent this preference is based upon nonpolicy characteristics of the incumbent.

Second, even if candidates do make accurate assessments of their probability of winning, they may still be mistaken about the policy preferences of voters. A challenger may be aware that the incumbent is vulnerable or unpopular, yet still err in his or her assessment of why the incumbent is vulnerable. Where candidates are able to estimate probability of winning, and where probability of winning is high enough to encourage candidates to follow a median voter strategy, they must then gauge where the median voter stands on the major policy issues. Thus, the second type of information of relevance is information about voter preferences on policy. If probability of winning is low enough that candidates decide they will not benefit from following a median voter strategy, this information is irrelevant to them. It is only where candidates deem winning the election
to be within the range of possibilities that they will even have use for this information.

Information, in both of these senses, is frequently regarded by social scientists as a quantity that can be easily obtained through careful analysis of survey data. Politicians’ means of gauging public opinion, however, are hardly limited to social scientific techniques. Most politicians take pride in their intuitive understanding of what voters want, just as many citizens surely feel that they gather some information about their neighbors and fellow citizens through conversations, through reading the newspaper, and through other unscientific, informal techniques (Geer 1996, 4; Herbst 1993, 99). In the interviews I discuss in this chapter, I therefore do not limit my definition of “information” to the results of opinion polls. The candidates with whom I spoke made assertions about public opinion far more frequently than they referred to opinion polls. The impressions they had about their chances of winning and about voter preferences on policy were often based upon a complex mix of information sources. These sources were certainly as influential in their campaigns, if not more so, than were opinion polls.

In this chapter I attempt to sift through the various types of information candidates have in order to pass some judgment upon the accuracy or utility of that information. Did the candidates with whom I spoke realistically assess their chance of winning? If so, and if they did deem winning the election to be within the realm of possibility, were they able to identify the preferences of voters? How did they do so?

In answering these questions, I aim to make a very simple point—that the type of information relevant to most congressional candidates is not particularly costly and that few nonincumbents make substantial errors in their measurement of voter preferences. To put this claim in the context of the alternatives in chapter 2, it presents evidence against the null hypothesis, the argument that there is no pattern to candidate competition in these races. Furthermore, insofar as nonincumbents derive cues about voter preferences from the incumbent and we know from chapter 3 that substantial divergence in these races does exist, it also casts doubt upon the median voter model.

Few would argue that opinion polls or other sophisticated measurement techniques are the one true way to measure voter sentiment. My intention in beginning my analysis with consideration of information, and of opinion polls, is not to argue against such a straw man. Rather, the interviews I describe here show the diversity of ways in which candidates gather information for their campaigns and the way in which opinion polls and other information-gathering mechanisms fit into candidates’ strate-
gies. I focus for much of the chapter on opinion polls because it can be easy for the casual observer to mistake polls for information-gathering devices when in many cases they are not used to acquire information at all.

Probability of winning, the first informational variable candidates must study, is not particularly difficult to gauge. Few candidates with whom I spoke were significantly in error about what their chances of winning were. The candidates who did have a good chance of winning did not necessarily learn their status from a poll; they did, however, have the resources to conduct polls, and many of them found polling helpful for other reasons. These candidates may have gained some information from their polls but most of these candidates did not believe that polling results changed their strategy. Instead, candidates viewed polling results as a persuasive tool; polling results could be selectively disclosed to campaign contributors or to the news media as a means of generating attention or of creating a bandwagon effect. The degree of cynicism about polling that I discovered among these candidates certainly indicates that they did not limit their definition of public opinion to what they were told in polls, nor did they necessarily view polls as a part of their information-gathering strategy. Polls were simply one more persuasive tool to be deployed in the campaign. As a result, the actual information contained in polls was only helpful insofar as it showed the candidate in the best possible light.

If opinion polls do not serve an informational function, this does not mean that candidates who conduct polls are still not somehow “better” than less competitive candidates at articulating public desires. There are certainly differences in candidate quality, but these differences have nothing to do with how well informed a candidate is. Knowing what the public prefers is one thing; using that knowledge to guide one’s campaign is another. In this chapter I demonstrate that opinion polls are (predictably) conducted by more competitive candidates more frequently than they are conducted by less competitive candidates; however, there is little difference across candidate types in the degree to which opinion polls are employed to determine policy positions. Consequently, the accuracy of public opinion measurement techniques does not necessarily improve as one moves from less competitive to more competitive candidates. Many candidates, incumbents and nonincumbents alike, rely in large part upon heuristics such as voter contact, interest groups, or the media to gauge public preferences. These candidates’ understandings of voter sentiment are often just as sophisticated or nuanced as are the understandings of candidates who poll extensively.

One note of caution in these findings is in order, however. The majority of these candidates lost; if they did hire highly paid pollsters and con-
sultants, they are likely to believe that these advisors failed them. In an era where even an inexpensive campaign poll costs $10,000 to $20,000, many candidates cannot afford to conduct opinion polls and thus must rely exclusively upon other means of gaining information. Many of these candidates may be guilty of disparaging polls that they could not have afforded anyway. I did not find, however, that cynicism about polls was a function of near losses, or of a lack of resources. Some candidates did make extensive informational use of polling data, and some candidates were very enthusiastic about the ability of survey data to guide their campaigns. Yet I was pointed to so many other sources of information—the incumbent's past record, cues from the presidential campaign, literature from interest groups, anecdotes from voters, articles in newspapers or magazines—that it is difficult to identify many cases where polling data would have been helpful to candidates to whom it was not available. This chapter does not seek to explain how candidates use information they have gathered to campaign (that is the aim of the next chapter); its modest aim is to ascertain that candidates know what they are doing and that those candidates who run against incumbents are able to base their information-gathering strategies upon the incumbent's positions and popularity.

The Role of Information in Three Campaigns

To explore the types of variations in campaign information, let us consider the perspectives of the candidates in three of the races I studied in 1996. The first, Betty Hull, technically qualifies as a “somewhat competitive” candidate under my definitions because of her ultimate vote share, but she raised little money, received scant media coverage, and was considered a long shot by campaign watchers. Because Hull was not able to poll, I contrast her campaign with that of Ken Blair, who fared as well as Hull yet did conduct polls which he seemed rather disgusted with. Finally, I look at the use of polls in an open-seat race, the race between Jay Hoffman and John Shimkus in southern Illinois, where polls were a major campaign resource and were used both as information and as rhetorical weapons. Together, these candidates show that opinion polls have value, and can provide some information, but many candidates, especially long-shot candidates, can easily do without them. Those who rely too heavily on polling can easily become frustrated; and those who use polls best use them both to reinforce other types of information and to deploy as a campaign tool in their own right.
Campaigning without Polls

Illinois’s Eighth District is one of seven predominantly Republican districts that cover Chicago’s suburbs. According to Politics in America (Duncan and Nutting 1999, 444), it is the most conservative district in Illinois, although residents of neighboring districts might argue this point. Former presidential candidate Phil Crane has represented the district since 1969; in that time he has had more competition for the Republican primary nomination than he has in the general election. He was not regarded as vulnerable by either national or local Democrats in 1996. In fact, the Democratic Party had trouble finding a challenger for him. The only Democrat who filed in the primary was eventually forced off the ballot, and Elizabeth Hull, an English professor at a local college, was recruited by the party to run. Hull raised slightly over $30,000 in her campaign and finished with 36 percent of the vote.

Hull did no polling during her campaign, and she remarked in her interview that she might have benefited from having poll results: “I didn’t pay for any polls, but maybe I should have, because everybody who was interested in giving money, they asked ‘What do your polls show?’ And I’d say that I hadn’t done any. That’s a very expensive process. It costs thousands of dollars, and for thousands of dollars you can do a lot of printing.”

The issues Hull presented in her campaign did not seem dramatically different from those of other Democratic challengers in the region. Hull gave no indication that opinion poll results would have changed her perception of voter preferences in the region. She recognized that the Eighth is one of the more conservative districts in the state, but she argued that she had a fairly good sense for the district: “You know, I didn’t do any push-polling or anything like that. Twenty-five years of living here and listening to my students, I get a really representative sample of the community.”

Hull was also provided information on the district and on issues to use against Crane by several previous challengers. She also cited the media as a major source of information for her campaign. During our interview she showed me extensive notes she had taken on Crane’s voting record. She also claimed that she was able to infer the direction of the campaign from Crane’s demeanor and his treatment of her. She confessed that she was uncertain about whether Crane had conducted polls; if he had, he had found little to worry about: “I kept hoping that Philip Crane would do some polling and would be so smug about the results that he would announce them, but apparently he either never did them or he didn’t like the results. I think it was most likely that he didn’t bother doing them. Why should he?”
As a recruit, Hull was not necessarily expected by her party to perform well. In the scant news coverage of her campaign, party officials were quoted pointing out the reasons why it was important not to allow Crane to go unchallenged (Talbott 1996). Hull still insisted that she could have won, given more time and money, but she also noted that from the beginning of the campaign she was “prepared to lose.” Hull’s campaign actually seems to have exceeded the expectations of those who persuaded her to run; she herself was quite proud of her showing. She would have been happy to have opinion polls, but not for the information; she seemed confident that she knew the views of her would-be constituents and that she knew the issues. Had she spent campaign money on polls, she might have had a different perspective on them, as the next case demonstrates.

A Campaign with Minimal Polling

In Ohio’s Thirteenth District, third-term Democrat Sherrod Brown won by almost as comfortable a margin as Crane, dispatching his Republican rival, trucking company owner Ken Blair, by a 60 to 36 percent margin. The Thirteenth, however, was drawn to be a competitive district. Bill Clinton won it very narrowly in 1992, and Ross Perot has fared quite well here, gaining 27 percent in 1992 and 14 percent in 1996. The Thirteenth includes several Cleveland suburbs and satellite cities; satellite cities such as Lorain and Elyria provide strong Democratic support, while some of the eastern Cleveland exurbs lean Republican. Brown had faced stiff competition in 1994, and had won that race by a mere seven thousand votes. His well-publicized fundraising following that scare may have scared off some Republicans. Blair, his eventual opponent, won a four-candidate Republican primary to face Brown but was only able to raise $54,000 to Brown’s $600,000.

When I spoke with Blair, he mentioned that he was still paying off campaign debts because of his polling: “I ran one poll. That’s why I still owe some money. I knew pretty well where everybody stood. Pretty much everything flowed the way I felt it would, so I didn’t do any more polls. It’s pretty much a waste of money.”

Blair claimed that he received most of his information about the district through his business and through research on the district. His relationship with Brown, in fact, goes back several years; Blair has been such a frequent letter writer and critic of Brown that, he says, the congressman has a staff person assigned to respond to his letters, and Brown himself had called Blair a few times prior to the campaign to address his complaints. Blair thus seemed to be a candidate whose policy views would not
have changed regardless of the findings of polls. He noted that his polls were conducted in order to have something to show contributors, and that he views the polls now as a net loss: “Our consultant said we needed to do a poll, which they charged me $8,200 for. Now I find out that I could get almost the same identical poll done for about $1,800 or $1,900 by a credible pollster. You know, those doggone polls are only as good as your questions. The only thing that’s different is how the questions are asked. You point your questions in the direction you want to go, and you’ve got five or six to corroborate each issue.”

Blair was somewhat detached from the actual mechanics of the poll; he received data analysis of the survey results, but felt he was paying too much for consulting when “really, the computer does the work.” Eighty-two hundred dollars is actually relatively inexpensive for a campaign poll, so the polling done for him may have been of lower quality than that done for some of the other candidates. Like many candidates who ran respectable campaigns yet never came close enough to winning to garner major attention or contributions, Blair did not note any informational uses of his polling; he appears to have had all of the information he required to run his campaign.

A Heated Campaign: Polls as Information and as Persuasion

Illinois’s Twentieth District is the only district among those I consider here that changed from Democratic to Republican hands in 1996. The contest in the Twentieth was one of the closest in the country. The district had been held without serious difficulty by Democrat Richard Durbin since 1982, but Durbin left the seat in 1996 to run for the Senate. Both the Democrats and Republicans poured money into the district; the end result was a 1,200 vote (0.4 percent) victory for Republican John Shimkus over Democrat Jay Hoffman. This contest also may have been the closest to a median voter scenario of the districts I studied. While the Springfield newspaper, the State Journal-Register, claimed in its endorsement of Shimkus that the two candidates held “widely divergent views of the role of federal government” (State Journal-Register 1996), the paper’s main political correspondent wrote the same day on the candidates’ similarities: “The new U.S. representative, who lives in Collinsville, will have spent some years in parochial school, favors gun-owners’ rights, is pro-life and was a high school jock. . . . All of those things describe both the Republican candidate and the Democratic candidate” (Schoenberg 1996b).
Prior to running for Congress, Hoffman had served in the state legislature and Shimkus had been a county treasurer. Shimkus had also run for Congress against Durbin in 1992, garnering a respectable 43 percent. Both candidates were relatively well known for nonincumbents, so much of the campaign debate revolved around the candidates’ past records. The two candidates also amassed large campaign treasuries; Shimkus spent $647,796 and Hoffman spent $812,397 (Duncan and Lawrence 1997, 501). Both had the resources to conduct extensive campaign polls, and the results of several of these polls were discussed in the Springfield and St. Louis newspapers. Clearly, Hoffman and Shimkus were playing a different game than were the other candidates I have discussed here.

According to Shimkus’s campaign manager (and, after that, congressional chief of staff) Craig Roberts, Shimkus had a benchmark poll done by the Wirthlin Group in January, while he was still in the midst of a seven-candidate primary. He then commissioned another large poll in May, pairing him and Hoffman, and his campaign continued to conduct tracking polls throughout the course of the general election campaign. Hoffman, who faced less serious primary competition than did Shimkus, did not take a benchmark until May. He then had the Feldman Group conduct another four-hundred-responder survey in October. Both candidates found each other’s polls scientifically sound, and they had few differences in their interpretations of each other’s polling strategy. For both candidates, poll results were used as a persuasive tool. Shimkus’s May poll showed him with a 50 to 39 percent lead over Hoffman, with a name recognition edge of 77 percent to 56 percent. Roberts stressed in media coverage that this result came before any push questions about Shimkus or Hoffman were asked (Schoenberg 1996a). When I spoke with Hoffman, he did not dispute Shimkus’s early advantage, but he noted that “It was entirely a function of name recognition. I don’t know about his poll. I don’t know how much of it is true. But the question is, once you start asking other questions, whether it tightens up. This is a fifty-fifty district. . . . Our May poll showed that he had greater name recognition; it didn’t show an eleven point gap. I don’t know what it was—maybe seven, eight, or nine percent. I can’t remember. But towards the end our poll showed it was a dead heat.”

Roberts agreed with Hoffman’s assessment of the district:

Our district, even when Durbin was here, is probably the closest swing district that’s out there. Every poll that we had done, when we just asked Republican versus Democrat in this race without names attached to it, at any point during the campaign it was almost always even. . . . Even in
that poll, there was no question that Hoffman was going to regain the base. That was what the poll reflected, was that John had already locked in the Republican base for himself. Hoffman was still needing to pull his base in. Eventually he did. In that poll, too, it was consistent throughout—if you asked just the generic ballot test, Republican versus Democrat, it was even. Then what mattered was the name ID, and that was John’s biggest advantage.

Hoffman had conducted a poll by the time Shimkus’s poll was made public, but he did not release the results. Instead, he merely noted in a June 13 *State Journal-Register* article that it was his policy not to release poll results, but that his own polls “show we’re right where we want to be” (Schoenberg 1996a).

Certainly it was to Shimkus’s advantage to release his benchmark results, while it was not to Hoffman’s advantage to do so. Shimkus was able to present a straightforward candidate-choice question, while Hoffman was not. Roberts admitted as much: “One of the biggest problems you’ll have is that you’ll hear about that ballot test—’Oh, he’s at 48, I’m at 37’—and you’ll think it’s over. As the campaign manager, I don’t care about the ballot test. That’s the last thing I focus on. If that didn’t even get reported on, I don’t care. Well, that isn’t entirely true, I do care. If John is running ahead then you want to release it to the media. That bolsters your support and diminishes your opponent’s.”

The Shimkus campaign used this poll to maximum advantage. In a June 5 *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* article, Shimkus responded to Hoffman’s challenge to a series of debates by insinuating that Hoffman’s desire for numerous debates was an indication that he was trailing in the polls (Sieverson 1996). Hoffman responded shortly before the election by releasing a poll that showed the candidates tied at 43 percent, with 14 percent undecided (Schoenberg 1996c). His press release pointed to Hoffman’s gains since May by pointing out that as his name recognition increased, so did voters’ preference for him. The press release argued that he would thus continue to gain: “Momentum is on his side. He has the advantage among undecided voters and the political atmosphere favors Democrats” (Schoenberg 1996c). Hoffman argued that Shimkus’s polls were attaining similar responses: “Our poll showed it was a dead heat, and I got 49.8 percent of the vote. So the poll was right. The only one that Shimkus released was the one showing him eleven points up, which was very early. Towards the end he wouldn’t release his poll results, because I assume it tightened up in his polls, too.”

Roberts did not dispute this. He argued that spending money to do
polls cannot be justified if poll results cannot be used to persuade: “What a lot of people don’t realize is that if they go out and spend ten or fifteen thousand dollars on a poll, then what do they do with that poll? You do the polling, you get the data, now you’ve got to do something with it. If you can’t mold the message you get out to the media from poll results, then you’ve really got to question why you did the poll in the first place.”

Roberts did note, however, that the polls Shimkus had done provided important information to the campaign. He cited the campaign’s emphasis on taxes as a decision influenced by poll results, and he pointed to Shimkus’s 1992 emphasis upon congressional ethics as another decision based in part on polls. Roberts claims that the greatest informational benefit of an opinion poll, however, is in targeting: “The value of a poll is not the ballot test, it’s the crosstabs. Who is out there supporting us? Who is not? Who is neutral? That’s what the value of that poll is. You see a lot of candidates who do the poll, and they look at the ballot test and they toss it aside. It’s no good use of your time to do that, and certainly no good use of your money.”

Hoffman agreed that polls were useful in targeting voters but claimed that his polls had little impact upon the issues he discussed during the campaign. He stated that this was a result both of his political instincts and his record as a state legislator: “We ran on issues that I believed in and on issues I thought were important to working families. We didn’t do that based on a poll. That’s what I ran on before, and that’s what I campaigned on in the primary. The same message that I delivered when I announced was the same message that I was delivering in November, more than a year later. What I was saying back then wasn’t based on a poll because we hadn’t done one yet.”

Both Hoffman and Shimkus used opinion polls with more facility than did most other candidates. The availability of veteran Washington pollsters enabled them to make informational use of their survey data, but it also provided them with a strong persuasive strategy. The Twentieth District was clearly a toss-up in 1996, and opinion polls may well have been useful in determining how to sway a few thousand votes. They could not, however, have made the difference in a campaign such as Betty Hull’s or Ken Blair’s. Neither Hoffman nor Shimkus seems to have made significant accommodation for polls in their issue approaches, primarily because there was no need to make such adjustments. These candidates showed an appreciation of the resources campaign polls could provide them, but they regarded them as a limited tool and an imprecise indicator of public opinion.
Contemporary Campaign Polling Techniques: Information or Persuasion?

These candidates’ comments reinforce much of what is already known about information acquisition, but their comments also enable us to put together different types of research so that we can have a broader picture of nonincumbent candidates’ strategies. As I argue below, these candidates, despite their differing electoral fortunes, are in fact each making rational political decisions. And each of these candidates’ information-gathering strategies is driven by what they need and what the costs of different alternatives are. Before fitting these case studies in with the rest of my interviews, however, let us consider existing research on information acquisition, and particularly public opinion polling, in congressional campaigns.

How pervasive is polling in congressional elections? And what other sources are there? Herrnson (2000, 186) reports that approximately 75 percent of House candidates used some form of polls; furthermore, when asked to rank different types of information sources, the candidates surveyed by Herrnson ranked opinion polling behind only voter contact in terms of importance. In Herrnson’s survey, the relative importance of polls is also consistent across parties and several other different candidate types. The only major difference is one of resources—uncompetitive candidates ranked polling third, behind voter contact and behind newspapers, television, and radio.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, political polling has become relatively standardized. Costs of polling have declined as centralized phone banking has become easier and more affordable, and as statistical programs have also become more accessible. By the 1980s, the national congressional campaign committees had begun to encourage, even to require, candidates in search of party assistance to supply them with the results of benchmark polls (Hamilton 1995). A benchmark poll can run anywhere from $10,000 to $25,000, and is generally the single most expensive component of a candidate’s polling (see Herrnson 2000, 102). The benchmark features a fairly large sample size, four hundred to five hundred respondents, and can run as long as one hundred questions (Hamilton 1995, 172–73). As one would expect with a survey of this size, it takes a bit of a kitchen sink approach, including open-ended questions, questions on voter mood, different framing devices for campaign issues, the positives and negatives of the relevant candidates, paired heats between candidates, probing of the incumbent’s potential liabilities, and name-identification questions (Hamilton 1995, 173; Asher 2001, 117–20). Unless the benchmark yields
surprisingly good numbers for a candidate, it is generally limited to internal consumption by the candidate and the party campaign committee. In the case of nonincumbent candidates, the probability of high numbers for name recognition is quite low. The benchmark, then, is not exclusively informational—disclosure does occur (as the Shimkus case shows), and experiments in question framing may stray far from voters’ actual policy preferences—but it is the most informational of the polls conducted by congressional candidates.

Given the high cost of the benchmark and the exhortation of Hamilton (1995, 170) that congressional candidates should spend between 5 and 10 percent of their campaign budget on polling, it seems that only the wealthier, more competitive candidates could afford more than a benchmark. For a candidate to take even a low-end benchmark and remain within Hamilton’s range requires raising at least $100,000. As I showed in the previous chapter, a sizeable minority of congressional candidates (41 percent of 1996 nonincumbents) do not raise this much. The party committees expect candidates to conduct a benchmark as both a demonstration of their prospects for winning and as a demonstration that they can raise the money necessary to poll (see Herrnson 2000, 91). After this hurdle is leaped, however, the party committees have shown more of a propensity to assist with polling.

The major polling activity after the benchmark is the tracking poll, which features a rolling sample, with a smaller sample size, over several days (Herrnson 2000, 187). The tracking poll is aimed at capturing change in voter preference and generally features only questions about voting preference. Some candidates also conduct focus groups to test issue approaches. According to Hamilton (1995, 174–75), 25 to 30 percent of House candidates use some sort of focus group; among the candidates I interviewed the numbers are lower, no doubt because I limit my inquiry to nonincumbents. Both types of methods are less statistically sound than the benchmark, and tracking polls are less informational. A candidate faced with numbers only on voting preference must make substantial inferences about which of her own campaign activities, be they spending, issue messages, advertising, or other strategic actions, have caused fluctuations in vote choice. Tracking polls serve more of a persuasive function than an informational one; disclosure of favorable tracking poll results is a common strategic tactic.

Cantril (1991, 226) has described these two functions of polls as the “town crier” function and the “political intelligence” function. His discussion of political intelligence is in part drawn from Gallup (see Gallup and Rae 1940) and Bruner’s (1944) early hopes that public opinion surveys
would bring about more democratic government—that they would allow politicians to assess the will of the public directly, as opposed to using the filter of pressure groups. Both Cantril and Crespi (1989) have catalogued the potential uses of polls above and beyond this standard social scientific function of learning about the public; these uses all fall within the “town crier” function of polling. That is, the poll is more valuable for what it can do for the candidate than for what it says to the candidate.

Cantril (1991, 215) also points out the value of polls in creating a “bandwagon” effect, wherein favorable poll results will encourage voters, the media, or interest groups to look more favorably upon a candidate, or at least to pay more attention to a candidate. He also emphasizes the value of opinion polls in raising campaign contributions; here, good polling numbers are a signal to potential contributors that a candidate is viable and is worthy of a contribution. While DeClercq (1978) downplays this function, the mentions of this phenomenon in numerous polling articles and the financial and polling expectations of the parties’ congressional campaign committees indicate that it is an important concern. Asher (2001) notes that strategic release of polling numbers also can maximize attention and contributions. Bradburn and Sudman (1989, 64) note that even when campaign polling results are “buried,” or kept from the public, they can play an important role in boosting the morale of campaign staff (or even of the candidate himself). In each of these cases, the accuracy of the poll results is of secondary importance. The DCCC and NRCC have restrictions for their candidates in defining which pollsters’ results will be deemed legitimate, but there are no similar safeguards for the public. There is still significant leeway in this regard, as candidates may time polls or frame questions to maximize favorable responses.

It is no wonder, then, that candidates often take a particularly instrumental approach to polling. Several studies have uncovered critical attitudes of candidates toward polls. Karlyn Keene, herself an influential pollster in Washington, has described a “Washington bias” in polling that diminishes the relevance of poll results for congressional candidates (cited in Cantril 1991, 207). Because of the emphasis on “established” polling companies, Keene argues, poll questions often do not address issues of particular relevance or salience to many congressional districts; this can, in effect, keep those issues off of the campaign agenda. Candidates are also aware of the numerous “town crier” functions of polls and are reluctant to place significant stock in poll results.

This reluctance may be partially normative; there has always been some stigma for many politicians in actually admitting that they are guided by polls. As Herbst (1998, 51) notes, politicians may feel insulted if
their own political judgment is contradicted by polls. Herbst’s interviews of state legislative staffers uncovered a disdain for opinion polls based not only upon the interviewees’ faith in their own political instincts, but also upon their belief that polls are used strategically to support legislative purposes. Polls are a useful communications or legislative tactic for these staffers, but the staffers believe as well that these polls are time-bound, potentially biased, and generally unreliable as political information.

Studies of public opinion about polls have established that citizens share, to some degree, the above perceptions of polling (for discussion, see Hollander et al. 1971). They are becoming somewhat more inclined to believe poll results presented to them by the media, but this may be because they have no vested interest in these results; they do not have an instrumental or strategic need for any particular polling outcome, and they have no need to persuade anyone with public opinion data. An instrumental need for public opinion data decreases the informational value of that data; persuasion and information cannot coexist easily.

To what resources, then, do candidates turn in order to acquire information about public preferences? Herbst (1998, 52–72) argues that legislative staffers use more informal means of calculating public opinion, such as interest groups and the media, which serve as a stand-in for the public. Policymakers, she notes, develop sophisticated means of accounting for bias among these groups; their communications are discounted according to their ideological bias. One problem with using these groups as stand-ins for the public, however, is that in doing so one presumes that these groups are conveying information from the public to policymakers; it is just as likely that they are conveying information to the public as well, and that they represent public opinion only to the degree that they persuade the public. This is a classic paradigm in literature on interest groups (see Wright 2003, 71–72). These information sources are thus not solely informational, either; they can be “spun” or used by legislators (or candidates) to persuade the public.

Eisinger (2003, 188–90) notes that legislators (and, one might again presume, candidates) use crowd size, mail, and other citizen contacts to evaluate public opinion. Unscientific techniques such as these are certainly vulnerable to rationalization; crowd size in particular is a famously bad tool for estimating one’s popularity, as Miller et al. (1976) argue about the McGovern presidential campaign. A candidate’s skill at interpreting these pieces of information correctly, at accounting for bias, is, again, indicative of the candidate’s political savvy. Both Herbst (1998, 155) and Eisinger (2003, 188–90) caution that their questioning was about polling as part of the legislative process, not the campaign process, yet such processes certainly still
affect the behavior of legislators on the campaign trail, and they certainly provide clues as to what candidates who do not or cannot poll do to gauge public opinion.

Eisinger (2003) notes that perceptions about the value of polls and other information sources guide policymaking more than does the actual accuracy of the information conveyed to the candidate or legislator. Herbst (1998, 87) concludes her study by noting that in the world of state legislative politics, “Democracy runs quite smoothly without attention to surveys, direct constituent contact, and other forms of conventional public opinion measurement.” Is this the case in congressional campaigns? For an answer to this question, let us turn to the comments of the candidates.

Congressional Candidates’ Measurements of Public Opinion

In the following pages, I turn back to my 1996 interviews to assess information gathering across different types of campaigns. For each candidate, there is a set of nested questions: Does the candidate actually have accurate information about voter preferences and his own chances? If so, how did the candidate acquire this information? And if not, why not? Did the candidate have no desire to acquire this information, was his political judgment flawed, or was the cost of information too high? These candidate interviews demonstrate that even while candidates were disdainful of opinion data, viewing it as a persuasive, not an informational, tool, they did have a sophisticated informational calculus. More competitive candidates (such as John Shimkus and Jay Hoffman) do indeed excel at gauging and articulating public preferences, but their ability to do this is not based upon the availability of allegedly objective information sources such as polls. The policy stances of less competitive candidates—of those similar to Betty Hull or Ken Blair—may not always resemble those of the most competitive candidates, but this is not a result of lack of information or misinformation.

The candidates’ interview responses are arranged below into three sections. First, I discuss how they acquired information on voter preferences. Second, I analyze their attitudes toward the most frequently discussed form of such information, opinion polling, and their reflections on whether polling served an informational function or a persuasive function. Finally, I attempt to draw conclusions about the accuracy of the information they did acquire.
Techniques of Information Acquisition

In few areas of campaigning are the differences between the haves and have-nots greater than in the area of polling. As table 4.1 shows, all of the very competitive candidates with whom I spoke commissioned polls during their campaign. These candidates also tended to commission not just one poll, but several polls; only three of these candidates, or 21 percent, purchased only one poll. Forty-three percent purchased three or more polls, and 64 percent also were provided poll results by sources outside the campaign—generally the national or state party organizations, sympathetic interest groups, or the media. An almost equally high percentage, 81 percent, of somewhat competitive candidates commissioned polls, but over half of those who did commission polls only purchased a benchmark poll. Two of these candidates purchased only a tracking poll late in the campaign. Only 14 percent of the somewhat competitive candidates were able to purchase three or more polls. Meanwhile, all but one of the long-shot candidates were unable to conduct polls of any sort; the one long-shot candidate who did poll used a local polling firm rather than a Washington, DC, company and found that his poll was not accorded very much credibility by his party committee. Two long-shot candidates gained access to outside polls, conducted by their state parties, but most long shots made it clear to me that polling was never a feasible option for them.

Cost of polling was an issue for all of these candidates, yet costs were addressed in a different manner by the different types of candidates. Many long shots had little idea how much a poll would even cost; estimates ran from $3,000 to as high as $25,000. Whatever the cost, they believed they had little to gain from polling. One long-shot candidate remarked: “We didn’t spend any money on polls because it made no sense. We had to put our money into the campaign, and the poll was just going to show we were behind. We knew we were not a targeted race no matter what our poll said” (Illinois). The reader will note that this candidate is referring to polling solely in the persuasive sense; she would have polled only if the poll would have shown she had a chance.

Somewhat competitive candidates were, as I mention above, generally able to afford some polling, yet if they did, these polls constituted a major part of their budget. Timing of the polls was important. Information from an early poll would be the most useful in guiding the campaign, yet money is scarce early in a campaign. A benchmark conducted late in the campaign risks describing a situation that is not changeable. As I note in chapter 6, the party committees encourage candidates to stock up money early, which can delay expenditures on polling until the campaign is already
underway. Despite the recommendation that candidates poll at the moment they are beginning their campaign, many must wait until they have already proven themselves as fundraisers (an activity that in itself benefits from good polling numbers). One very competitive candidate remarked that “We didn’t poll until July 1. Our goal was to get $100,000 in cash in the bank by the June 30 FEC report. So we couldn’t poll until after that” (Minnesota).

Among the most competitive candidates, however, cost was somewhat less of an issue, as was persuasion. The less competitive candidates worried about the cost of polls because the opportunity costs were steeper. A $20,000 poll would take $20,000 out of a budget that might only be $150,000 or so to begin with; it might cut an advertising budget in half. More competitive candidates were able to buy more polling without worrying as much about those polls’ effects upon their budget. They were, then, more likely to talk to me about the content of those polls apart from the polls’ impact (either directly, in terms of what they said, or indirectly, in terms of the polls’ opportunity costs) on their campaign. The most competitive candidates seldom raised the issue of the cost of polls. They spent more time discussing the mechanics of the polls they had conducted.

The structure of polling for a well-heeled candidate is fairly uniform. Thirty of the fifty-two candidates conducted a benchmark poll with an es-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poll</th>
<th>Long Shots</th>
<th>Somewhat Competitive</th>
<th>Very Competitive</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark and Track</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark and 2+ Tracks</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track Only</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Polling</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Polling Only</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Polling</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Competitiveness is measured such that long-shot candidates received less than 35 percent of the vote and spent less than $100,000; somewhat competitive candidates either received between 35 and 45 percent of the vote or, failing to do that, spent at least $100,000; and very competitive candidates received over 45 percent of the vote. The statistics for very competitive candidates include winning candidates.
tablished Washington polling firm. The most frequently mentioned items on these polls were name identification questions, responses to description of both candidates, incumbent positives and negatives, and associations of issues with the incumbent. The benchmarks these candidates conducted also featured a number of issue questions which several candidates reported were useful in gauging public mood. Timing was still an issue here, but it was not an issue of cost; rather, it was an issue of interpretation. The standard benchmark poll asks a vote choice question early, before describing the candidates, then asks the “incumbent reelect” question or gives a generic description of the candidates and asks the vote choice question again. For example, one candidate gave me the following example of a “blind” question: “Who do you want your congressman to be? Thirty-seven-year-old West Point graduate who’s never held paid office, who believes government is too big and spends too much, and is conservative on most political issues, or sixty-year-old professional politician who’s spent his life on the public payroll, who’s spent fourteen years in Congress, and who’s successful in getting federal money for the district?” (Illinois).

Needless to say, there is tremendous potential for question-wording bias here, but such questions do provide issue or candidate framing information and can make the early poll more informative than simple vote choice questions. Several candidates pointed out that the early poll is more informative for the campaign than is the late poll because any challenger’s name recognition is going to be low early in the campaign: “You do polling during elections and you see the numbers move and you see why they’re moving, that offers encouragement, certainly. It not only offers encouragement, it offers understanding, because nobody knows who you are when you first do polls. Everybody thinks they’re better known than they really are. That probably brings both feet back to the ground, and probably both of your knees, too” (Illinois).

For a candidate who has interpreted the benchmark poll well and has the resources to continue polling, the tracking poll can be a test of advertising strategy. That is, it can be used by a candidate to monitor the effects of resource use. As such, its effectiveness is limited to those candidates who have the resources to commit to moving public opinion. Because of the much more limited length and sample size of the tracking poll, a tracking poll may only be as good as the benchmark it follows, as one very competitive candidate explained:

We made the major thrust of our benchmark poll the incumbent. We knew in our benchmark that the incumbent lost doing his best positives to my best positives. We wanted to make it as big as possible, because if
you don’t you’re not getting good information. Then the track is like getting a flat response, like taking a snapshot. We were able to see that I was getting enough information out that it was causing his standing to deteriorate. He had huge name ID in all the polls, but we were able to see that in spite of his high name ID he was really low to reelect. (Wisconsin)

Such results are not necessarily issue information, but they are campaign information. The poll is meant to guide campaigning rather than to persuade others outside the campaign through its results.

If the very competitive candidates admitted any misgivings about polling, it was that they polled too much. There were several very competitive candidates who did not refer to useful campaign information gained from their polls, but few regarded the polls as a worthless endeavor. Some of the most comfortable winners I interviewed, however, shared the belief of the long shots that polling would not actually matter to the campaign; they already knew what the outcome of the race would be. In the winners’ case, however, there were ample resources to poll, so the expenditure was not a matter of concern.

The above comments establish that candidates can gain useful information from polls. The benchmark, in particular, contains numerous issue questions that could provide the candidate with a quite accurate picture of the district and of whether his or her own ideas reflect what voters want from their representative. There are, however, many other sources of information on voter preferences. As table 4.2 shows, when I asked candidates “What were your most important sources of information about what voters wanted?” very few candidates mentioned opinion polls. Opinion polls lagged fourth, behind political experience, district and incumbent data, and voter contact, and barely ahead of interest groups.

Strangely, all three long-shot candidates who had access to any sort of poll—whether their own or polls commissioned by their party—made reference to those polls as valuable information sources. Two other long shots pointed out that they did not have access to polls of the district, but that they would conduct polls if elected to determine their legislative actions. Many candidates, however, insisted that they did not need polls to ascertain what voters wanted: “I learned about the voters by going around talking to people and reading the newspaper. I don’t think it’s magical. It was a matter of how I could learn most efficiently. Do you want to do a couple of polls, or do you want to send literature out? So I figured I knew the issues and would be able to find out what people are concerned about without polls” (Illinois).

Political experience was by far the most frequently cited source of in-
formation for those who had held political office. Large percentages of candidates of all types also reported that they had researched their district thoroughly, and that voter contact was a major information source: “I didn’t have the resources during my campaign to do polls to figure out where the voters stood. But the way I would campaign was to stand at shopping centers, and I would meet three hundred or four hundred people a day. That’s more people than you meet doing a poll” (Wisconsin). Several candidates, mostly Republicans, also reported making use of information supplied by interest groups. Republicans of all levels of competitiveness mentioned receiving information from the Heritage Foundation and GOPAC; a smaller number of Democratic long shots reported that the Sierra Club had sent information they used during the campaign.

Finally, a less frequently cited but important information source was cues from other campaigns. Although Bob Dole was not a frequent visitor to the states I study here, many Democrats were able to infer from Bill Clinton’s strategy in their states what they should be doing: “One of the things that you have to remember is that when you’re running a campaign in the same year as a presidential election, you can look at what they’re

Table 4.2. Candidate Information Sources by Competitiveness

“What were your most important sources of information about what voters’ views and concerns were in your district?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Long Shots</th>
<th>Somewhat Competitive</th>
<th>Very Competitive</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Experience</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District/Incumbent Data</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voter Contact</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polls</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest Groups</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Campaigns</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Campaign Cues</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultants</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td><strong>17</strong></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
<td><strong>52</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Respondents were permitted to choose more than one category; column totals should not equal 100 percent.
doing. When Clinton’s here talking about Medicare, you figure they’re doing that out of a poll, not just because they figure it’s right. They’re doing it because they’ve done twenty-seven polls. So certain issues you figure if it’s important for them, it’s important for you, too. If you have good political sense, it’s not like rocket science” (Illinois).

Especially among the crop of second-time Republican candidates, polls conducted in 1994 were still a major information source. Twelve candidates I interviewed had run in the general election for Congress previously; all but four of these were Republicans who had run in 1994. Several candidates referred to polling they had done in 1994: “I don’t think two campaigns are ever completely the same. But the issues stayed pretty similar. Clinton was popular in 1994, he was more popular in 1996. All that really changed was that in 1996 [the incumbent] had more of a record” (Minnesota).

All of the candidates quoted above had done some polling in their campaign except the two who specifically state in their quotes that they did not. There are no variations among these candidates in the information sources mentioned that are likely to be attributable to having polled; variation by candidate groups seems more likely to be related to finances and to competitiveness. No long shots, for example, mentioned prior political experience as a source of information because not many of them had any. Few other differences stand out.

**Candidate Attitudes toward Opinion Polls**

One could easily conclude, then, that opinion polls are scarcely worth their cost in terms of information. If one reaches this conclusion, however, then it would be valid to ask why the candidates who do not view opinion polls as a significant information source still invest in them.

For most of the candidates who had conducted polls, there was an informational component to the data they gathered even if gaining campaign guidance from such information was not the actual reason the poll was conducted. Thus, candidates cannot clearly be separated into an “informational polling” camp and a “persuasive polling” camp. I do classify candidate remarks, however, into the two categories. Results are shown in table 4.3. I categorize candidate references to actually learning what voters’ preferences were as “strict information.” I also employ a rather loose definition of information, which includes candidate comments about ways to frame questions for maximum effect on the public; ways to prioritize the issue stances they had and focus on those issues most salient to the public;
ways to target particular issue constituencies or geographic constituencies; and ways to track the effectiveness of one’s own message and one’s opponent’s message. In the persuasion category I place comments about push-polling; about strategically releasing polls to the media; about lifting the morale of the candidate or the candidate’s supporters; and about providing poll results to the party campaign committees, interest groups, or other potential supporters and contributors.

In table 4.3, the persuasive uses of opinion polls outweigh the informational uses for long shots and somewhat competitive candidates. Differences are particularly stark among somewhat competitive candidates, 52 percent of whom used polls to try to gain party support. Although the very competitive candidates did lean slightly more toward using polls as information, they did not use them as strict information; instead, they used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.3. Candidate Attitudes toward Opinion Polling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Categorization of candidates’ responses about the uses to which public opinion polls were put in their campaign.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion Polls as Information</th>
<th>Long shots</th>
<th>Somewhat Competitive</th>
<th>Very Competitive</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Strict” Information</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set Priorities</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracking Opponent</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeting</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion Polls as Persuasion</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Push Polls</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Disclosure</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morale</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Support</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributions/ Interest Groups</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 17 21 14 52

Note: Respondents were permitted to choose more than one category; column totals should not equal 100 percent.
opinion polls to fine-tune their campaign. None of the most competitive candidates actually used polls to discern what public preferences were.

To be sure, there are varying degrees of informational content in the different types of poll uses I categorize here as “information.” Very few candidates actually said that they learned about new issues or gained information that caused them to seriously rethink their campaign strategies. It should be noticed that none of the most competitive candidates claimed that their polls were used as information in the strict sense—that is, that they actually learned information about the constituency’s voting or policy preferences that they did not already know. Most candidates insisted that polls told them nothing that they did not know. While such a claim illustrates the prejudices I discussed above toward politicians who act based on polls, several candidates actually seemed irritated not to have learned very much that did not accord with their intended campaign focus. The majority of informational comments fell under the loose definition of information. The most competitive candidates spoke of their polls more in terms of information than did less competitive candidates, but they tended to stress that their polls caused no dramatic changes in their campaigning, as the following comments show:

On our first poll, we were trying to decide what the issues were and trying to discern the right language to communicate with people. Trying to find my strengths and his strengths and my weaknesses and his negatives. That was all. And as it turned out, the issues that I thought were important were the issues they thought were important. We framed them a little differently, but basically those were the key ones. (Minnesota)

Our polling information indicated that when people were told how he voted, a third of his core support moved. We never had a true solid lead during the campaign, but we did have that poll telling us that if we could tell people about his record, we could win. (Ohio)

Informational discussions of polling tended, however, to be brief and often to be limited to individual issues that were particularly malleable—that could be phrased in a number of different ways in order to obtain different responses. Framing questions in such a manner tended to be regarded as a positive, informational side of polling to some candidates—they could find out how best to cast their ideas—and more negatively, as a way of slanting poll results, by others. In their least savory form, these experiments in question framing could, several candidates across competitiveness categories worried, be used in an unscientific push-poll that would
be intended to persuade the survey respondent to vote a particular way based on information provided in the poll.

The balance of informational remarks and persuasion remarks tips when one moves from the most competitive candidates to the less competitive ones. It is in the middle competitiveness category, however, that most of the more caustic remarks about polling occur. Over half of the somewhat competitive candidates reported that polls were for consumption by the party, or were to be used to solicit contributions:

You do two things with a poll. One is you do a poll to figure out our own viability, and the other is you do a poll to test a few messages. If things go well, you can go to donors or the party and say, “Look, we used this message, we think we can win this race.” (Minnesota)

The reason we conducted a poll, and we should have done a focus group too, was to get some Republican money, because they go only by the numbers. Then we polled again, the week before the election, for the same reason, because there were some additional dollars out there to be had that week. (Wisconsin)

Intriguingly, the somewhat competitive candidates spoke solely of persuading their party and potential contributors, not the general public. Among the most competitive candidates, the media were also fair game, as I showed earlier in the Hoffman/Shimkus case. That is, a good poll can be strategically disclosed to the media; for somewhat competitive candidates, however, a “good poll” is not necessarily one that shows the challenger winning. It is one that shows that the incumbent is beatable, that the challenger might win if he can present particular issues or lines of attack to the public.

Among these candidates, then, for whom polling is a means of making money and of getting party support, polls take on a less scientific tone:

It boggles my mind that everything is so slanted, in both directions. I don’t see any objective polls. A good example of that is focus groups. You get about two dozen people, and they’re supposed to tell the candidate what it’s all about. Nobody appointed them the campaign arbitrage, you know? Really, that’s what candidacies are all about. It’s about listening. But on a philosophical level, you take that information and you use it to articulate your message. That’s not what I’m seeing, though. Instead it’s all about polls and focus groups. (Ohio)
We did one poll, and it wasn’t very good. So I told the national party if they wanted more polls, find somebody to pay for it. I know that polling is made to say whatever you want it to say, to convince people. [My opponent’s] poll shows him up by twenty points. We know that wasn’t true. Everybody knew it. If they poll in Minneapolis, they get one result. If they poll out here, then I’m going to do better. (Minnesota)

I would guess that since the poll was conducted by a national pollster who conducted polls all across the country, they tried out all the hot-button issues—Medicare, Medicaid, some of the egregious budget votes. The poll certainly showed that Gingrich wasn’t very popular. They tried all this stuff that was working somewhere else, and I assume they had similar responses here. But they didn’t tell us anything about our district. (Wisconsin)

The long-shot candidates tended to have less to say about polling because they had less familiarity with opinion polls. Those who mentioned the persuasive component of polling were candidates who were certain they would not receive party money, and who thus chose not to conduct opinion polls because they regarded opinion polls as a device for trying to get party support or other interest group contributions. Those long shots who mentioned information received from polls included the lone long shot who did conduct polls and one other long shot who did not conduct polls but promised to do so if elected to find out what voters wanted.

Are Opinion Polls an Accurate Source of Information?

Estimating the accuracy of the information candidates did have is largely a subjective endeavor. The most relevant question in this regard is how accurate candidates’ information truly needs to be. For a long-shot candidate, merely knowing that one is extremely unlikely to win may be sufficient; detailed information about voters’ preferences on myriad issues is not likely to be particularly useful to the campaign. For a candidate who estimates that he is likely to get approximately 50 percent of the vote, however, such information can provide the crucial distinction between victory and defeat. The most important variable in this regard, then, is candidates’ beliefs about how well they will do. Most of the candidates with whom I spoke had determined the vote share they were likely to get; these estimates ranged from 20 percent to over 50 percent. Some candidates actually supplied me with percentage figures about what they believed their
chances of winning were. The majority of candidates, however, told me they believed their chances were “fair,” “good,” “poor,” or used other such general estimates.

Although these interviews were conducted after the election, the most interesting result of my questions to the candidates about their beliefs was that candidates spoke just as frequently of being deceived by opinion polls as they did of finding accurate information about how well they were doing. Only thirteen of the fifty-two candidates—three of the seventeen long shots and ten of the twenty-one somewhat competitive candidates—told me that they felt they had overestimated their chance of winning the election. Others claimed that the estimates they made at the beginning of the campaign about the likely outcome were in the range of the eventual result. Of the ten somewhat competitive candidates who fared worse than they had expected to, all had conducted polls. Seven of these ten were from Minnesota or Illinois, states where there were also competitive senatorial campaigns, and many of them felt that their polls had overestimated their support because these campaigns had not boosted turnout as much as they had expected: “People trusted the results of our poll. Then they saw the results on Election Day and said, ‘How can the polls be there and Election Day you’re here? The spread is that far?’ The thing is, again, we didn’t have control of the top of the ticket” (Minnesota).

Candidates also voiced similar concerns about the effects of the presidential race, which seemed to most of the candidates to have been predetermined in their states. Aside from those candidates who blamed low turnout for their worse-than-expected showing, there were also those who had been cynical about the information they received from opinion polls even during the campaign:

We got our hands on a poll through the grapevine about a week before the election that put us almost dead even. I need to tell you that I was surprised at that. I thought we would lose. I’m a very positive person, but I just did not believe there was a way for us to win, because I knew in a presidential election year [the incumbent] would bring out close to 70,000 extra voters, while we bring out about 4,000 more. I didn’t want to bring anyone down, but I just did not believe those numbers. (Wisconsin)

Those candidates who had relatively accurate estimates of their chance of winning tended to rely upon district voting trends, upon the incumbent’s past success, and upon the advice of prior candidates. Above, I noted that campaign consultants will encourage a candidate to poll before
or immediately after entering a race in order to test his or her viability, to avoid committing resources to a hopeless cause. Few candidates whom I interviewed were able to do so. Even many quite competitive candidates waited until July of the election year or later to conduct benchmark polls. Polls thus did not determine strategy, nor were they a motivating factor in the campaign. Polls seem, then, more a result of information about probability of winning than they do a source of such information. That is, candidates poll more extensively as their expected vote approaches 50 percent. Accurate information about voter preferences is derived from other sources.

Conclusions

In chapter 3 I noted the rarity of convergence in congressional campaigns, and I noted that this lack of convergence is far more likely to be due to the failure of challengers, not incumbents, to seek vote-maximizing positions. This lack of convergence must be for one of two broad reasons—by choice or by error. The comments above about the plethora of information sources available to candidates, as well as the low cost and easy access of several of these sources, indicate that choice seems a far more plausible explanation than error.

The remarks of these candidates certainly should not be taken to suggest that candidates who conduct opinion polls are no different from the candidates who do not poll. They are. These differences, however, have little to do with the actual information conveyed in opinion polls. They are differences in resources. Opinion polls were not cited as the most important source of information about voters’ views or campaign issues by a majority in any of the competitiveness groups. The most competitive candidates were more likely than were other candidate types to cite polls as a source of information, but they defined “information” in this context quite narrowly—they wanted to know how an opponent’s advertisements were affecting their campaign, they wanted to tinker with ways of framing questions, or they wanted to investigate which areas or groups of voters were most receptive to their campaign. In few cases did candidates claim that opinion polls actually persuaded them how voters as a group approached the campaign issues.

Careful consideration of polling data may make the differences between a very competitive losing candidate and a winning candidate, but it seems unlikely to make more than a few percentage points worth of difference. For many candidates, the simple information that they were ex-
tremely unlikely to win was the only information needed. This does not mean that losing candidates did not understand public preferences; they merely saw no reason to adapt to these preferences. In sum, different types of candidates need different types of information, but having a sense of what voters want is a basic part of political intuition. Candidate information about public opinion is not a product of opinion polls, because they are reluctant to believe they need a survey research firm to tell them what their potential constituents would like. Information is not about polls for them, yet they continue to conduct them because polls are not about information for them either. One might decry the instrumental need on the part of many of these candidates for polls as persuasive tools. Many of the candidates might agree. Yet in the meantime, it appears, only a lucky handful of candidates have the luxury of considering polls as a source of information. These are the candidates who generally have the least need to persuade supporters, and these are the candidates who do, in fact, already know enough about the voters that they have little need to use public opinion information to make significant changes in their campaigns.

If the median voter model’s lack of correspondence to these election dynamics is not simply a function of error on the part of candidates, then, given that incumbents do tend to follow a median voter strategy, candidate divergence must be the result of conscious choices by challengers. This chapter has laid the groundwork for consideration of the applicability of a sequential positioning framework to congressional campaigns. Whereas in this chapter my argument has been primarily negative—that candidates are not misinformed or misguided—in the subsequent chapters I seek to provide positive evidence for the existence of sequential positioning and expressive campaigning in congressional elections.