Expressive Politics

Boatright, Robert G.

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CHAPTER 7

Expressive Campaigning in 2000 and Beyond

In a study such as this, in which the views of some candidates are presented as a representative sample of all candidates’ views, two potential objections to making general claims seem evident. First, insofar as these candidates do not represent a random sample, and are drawn from four contiguous states, one might ask whether these candidates do in fact share important characteristics with candidates from other regions of the country. That is, have I thus far merely been describing trends in electoral competition that are peculiar to the four Midwestern states of Illinois, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin? What similarities or differences might we expect these candidates to have with candidates from states such as Alabama, California, Maine, or Wyoming? And second, why should we be confident that the 1996 election was “typical,” that these candidates represent a fact of life in American politics or a trend in congressional elections, rather than an aberration due to factors peculiar to the 1996 elections?

By way of conclusion, in this chapter I seek to address both of these concerns, reiterating my argument as it applies to candidates outside of my original study. Many of the variables I have considered would seem somewhat impervious to change over time or across states—that is, there seems to be little reason to expect congressional candidates in some states to be superior information gatherers to those in other states. It also seems that while the issues that matter should vary substantially across states or across election years, the basic structure of ideological competition—that is, candidates facing vulnerable incumbents should seek to take popular positions, while candidates facing safe incumbents should not necessarily seek to do so—should not vary. And while the incumbency advantage may fluctuate somewhat over time, these fluctuations appear, at least in the past few decades, to take place within a narrow range—incumbency seems always to carry some advantage in House elections, no matter what the year is or which states we are considering.
It is worth investigating, however, the fluctuations that we may have theoretically informed reasons for expecting and the differences that may exist across years and across regions of the country. Therefore, I conducted a second set of interviews in the months following the 2000 elections in four different states—in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. While these states are not as sharply different from the four Midwestern states I considered in 1996 as, for instance, states of the Deep South or the West may be, the application of the theory to these states does demonstrate that the expressive politics scenario does hold in other regions of the country. And while, for obvious reasons, it is impossible to project the theory backward in time to consider bygone elections, my conclusions regarding the 2000 elections demonstrate that the patterns of competition I found in 1996 were not atypical, and, if anything, elections in 2000 were characterized more by expressive campaigning than were the 1996 races. This second set of interviews does, however, reveal two notable wrinkles to the expressive politics argument. First, in terms of the timing of the elections, the proximity of the 2000 races to the impending 2002 redistricting resulted in a greater degree of forward-looking behavior on the part of candidates; that is, many 2000 candidates thought about the likely future shape of their district, and the feasibility of future campaigns for Congress, in considering the positions they would take in their campaigns. Second, peculiarities in the location (proximity to Washington, DC) and the electoral laws of this second set of states (namely, that in two of them state legislators were not up for election in 2000) may produce a higher-than-expected number of strategic and politically experienced challengers than we might otherwise expect.

Before summarizing the findings of this second round of interviews, however, three discussions of context are in order: a discussion of differences between the 2000 and 1996 congressional elections, a discussion of the differences in politics and political culture between the four Midwestern states I considered in 1996 and the four Mid-Atlantic states I considered in 2000, and a discussion of the import of these differences for our theoretical expectations.

**Developments in Congressional Elections, 1996–2000**

The 1998 elections were quite different from those of 1996 in some ways. The Democratic Party gained five seats in the House of Representatives, defying the predictions of virtually all election forecasters and defying the historical tendency of the party holding the presidency to lose seats in the
midterm elections. The 1998 elections were also a reversion to the normal pattern of uncontested seats. Ninety-five incumbents, or 23.8 percent, ran without major-party opposition. The 1998 elections garnered less media attention than did those of 1996, in part because it was believed that control of Congress was not at stake (see Brady, Cogan, and Fiorina 2000, 239–40).

In other ways, however, the 1998 elections were very similar to those of 1996, and the fortunes of incumbents and nonincumbents were also similar: 98.5 percent of incumbents seeking reelection won; only six incumbents were defeated. All six of the victorious 1996 candidates whom I interviewed ran for reelection, as did nine of my interviewees who had lost in 1996. Five of the six incumbents were reelected, and none of the nine nonincumbents were victorious.

All but one of the victorious 1996 candidates I spoke with won reelection, and most of them won without substantial difficulty. For instance, chapter 4’s John Shimkus, despite the fact that his district was judged to be one of the most competitive in the nation in 1996, was not targeted by the Democratic Party. Shimkus received 61 percent of the vote. Of the losing 1996 candidates, several were expected to be potential winners in 1998. Foremost among these was Lydia Spottswood, profiled in chapter 6. Her 1996 opponent, Republican Mark Neumann, gave up his seat to run (unsuccessfully) for the Senate against Democrat Russ Feingold. Spottswood’s district was deemed by both parties to be a potential pickup for Democrats, but Spottswood fell farther short in 1998 than she had in 1996, receiving only 43 percent of the vote (Duncan and Nutting 1999, 1490). Other candidates from my sample encountered similar results—of the nine candidates who ran again in 1998, only three improved upon their 1996 showing, and these three still lost.

More noteworthy were the candidates profiled in the previous chapters who declined to run. Although the Democratic incumbent Sidney Yates finally retired from Congress in Illinois, his 1996 challenger, Joseph Walsh (profiled in chapter 5), declined to run again, perhaps believing that 1996 had been his best chance. The Republican candidate for this seat, a man who had been the Republican nominee in two previous elections, ran a relatively low-profile campaign. The seat easily remained in Democratic hands. Several other 1996 incumbents whose districts were in the states I considered retired in 1998, but only one of these districts—Wisconsin’s second district—changed party hands. While only three incumbents in the states I considered in 1996 ran unopposed, six incumbents from these states ran unopposed in 1998. One of these was Wisconsin’s James Sensenbrenner, whose 1996 opponent, Floyd Brenholt, I profiled in chapter 5.
By 2000, competition in these states had grown even more lopsided than had been the case in 1996 and 1998. In contrast to my 1996 breakdown, in which I deemed twenty districts to be uncompetitive, twenty-two to be somewhat competitive, and eleven (of which were open seats) to be very competitive, in 2000 there were again three uncontested seats (including Jerry Costello, whose 1996 race I discussed in chapter 6), but there were thirty-four uncompetitive districts, eleven somewhat competitive districts, and only eight very competitive districts. Of these eight very competitive districts, four were open seats. Of the unsuccessful candidates I interviewed in 1996, two ran again in 2000. Chapter 5’s Mary Rieder made her second attempt to defeat Gil Gutknecht, but, as she had predicted in 1996, Gutknecht was more difficult to beat in 2000 and finished with 56 percent of the vote. The remaining first-time winners from 1996 all had solidified their districts by 2000, and none were seriously challenged. As in 1998, one notable feature of 2000 is the candidates I interviewed in 1996 who chose not to run in races that their party eventually won or in open-seat races. In Minnesota’s Second District, Democrat David Minge was unseated by political neophyte Mark Kennedy; Minge’s somewhat competitive 1994 and 1996 challenger did not run. In Ohio’s Twelfth District, John Kasich retired and Cynthia Ruccia (profiled in chapter 6) chose not to run again; a far more politically experienced Democratic candidate emerged and this race became the most closely contested Ohio race, yet the Republicans held the seat. Other open seats in suburban Chicago, the Champaign-Urbana area of Illinois, and in Minneapolis were hotly contested but the 1996 and 1998 challengers either did not run or did not win their party’s nomination.

In general, House elections in 2000 were both more competitive and less competitive than those of 1996, depending on one’s measuring device. As the partisan balance in the House drew closer in the wake of the 1996 and 1998 elections, spending and campaigning in selected districts became more intense. Yet the number of districts that were highly competitive shrank. Excluding three candidates defeated in their party’s primaries in 2000, the incumbent reelection rate in 2000 had grown to 98.5 percent—only six of four hundred incumbents were defeated. While several prominent Republicans retired as a result of the party’s term limits on committee and subcommittee chairs, the majority of these retirements were by members who held safe seats. Only seventeen seats changed party hands, the third-lowest total since the 1940s (Jacobson 2001, 191).

According to Congressional Quarterly’s preelection handicapping, only nine of the four hundred incumbent-held seats were toss-ups or leaned toward the challenger, with an additional twenty-five that leaned
toward the incumbent. Nineteen of the thirty-five open seats were judged to be competitive, for a net total of fifty-three competitive seats, the lowest total since 1990. According to Herrnson (2001, 169), a total of forty-three races were targeted by the AFL-CIO, one measurement of donors’ expectations about competitiveness, and forty-three Republican candidates received assistance from a Medicare reform organization. These seats received a tremendous influx of money, interest group attention, and party attention, yet they represent a small number of House seats. 

Campaign spending illustrates some of the inequalities at play in 2000. Average spending appears even more lopsided than in 1996 when we compare challengers and incumbents—the median challenger spent $51,408, the median incumbent spent $618,718, and the median open-seat candidate spent $900,795. Another means of addressing competition is in looking at the average disparity. According to Jacobson’s index of average inequality, 2000 represents the most lopsided election year in recent history, approached only by the 1990 elections (Jacobson 2001, 193). The party campaign committees spent more money than ever in 2000, with the DCCC and the NRCC each spending over $50 million, but the focus of these spending efforts was on a small number of races (Herrnson 2001, 167).

It is somewhat more difficult to measure changes in the political environment of House races between 1996 and 2000. The 1998 elections had, of course, taken place in the shadow of President Clinton’s impending impeachment trial, to which many observers attributed the Republican Party’s unusual failure to gain seats at the midterm of a Democratic presidency (Herrnson 2000, 87–88). The 2000 elections shared several aspects of the 1996 elections—they took place at a time of economic growth, of tenuous partisan balance in the House, and the presence of a presidential election. The 2000 elections differed in that there were relatively few retirements, overall; the presidential election did not feature an incumbent and was far closer than the 1996 race; and, in contrast to 1996, congressional approval ratings were climbing (Herrnson 2001, 156). The lack of any presidential coat-tails is evident in the results of the 2000 races, where the minority Democrats gained one seat. Herrnson argues that impeachment had, for the most part, faded as an issue in all but two or three House elections (Herrnson 2001, 158), and congressional (as opposed to committee) term limits appear also not to have been a major issue (Jacobson 2001, 197). Although the 106th Congress continued a trend of polarization between parties, it would seem that the few districts which did change hands changed in such a way as to “sort out” instances of district-legislator partisan mismatch. All told, the issue context of 2000 does not seem remarkably different from 1996.
As Jacobson notes, however, the 2000 elections were not necessarily a harbinger for future House races; they are typical of the elections that precede a redistricting. In terms of spending and in terms of the number of competitive races, they followed a trend of the 1970s and 1980s in which seats are gradually sorted out after a redistricting and competition declines over the ten-year period (Jacobson 2001, 191). In terms of the number of contested seats, they followed the trend of having fewer uncontested seats in presidential election years, although the percentage of uncontested seats—15.8 percent (again, excluding Louisiana)—was substantially higher in 2000 than it was in 1996.

As a final note on the political context of 2000, there was unfortunately no issue survey of the breadth of the 1996 Time/Congressional Quarterly candidate survey that I used in chapter 3. Project Vote Smart again surveyed all candidates in 2000, with potentially scalable results, but the response rate was not nearly as high as the 1996 Time/Congressional Quarterly survey or Project Vote Smart’s 1996 survey. Fortuitously, however, a candidate positioning study was conducted by Harvard political scientist Barry Burden which has findings somewhat comparable to my 1996 results (Burden 2001b). Burden’s Candidate Ideology Survey simply asked all major-party House candidates to place themselves on a 0–100 scale of liberalism or conservatism. Burden was able to proxy incumbents’ positions using first-dimension W-NOMINATE scores to obtain a total of 153 candidate dyads and 147 challenger positions. Scatterplots of differences between all Democrats and Republicans indicate substantial divergence between parties, but marked responsiveness to district voting (here, 1996 Dole vote) on the part of incumbents. As is the case in my analysis, challengers exhibit no significant responsiveness; the correlation between challengers’ positions and district voting preferences is actually negative. What little convergence there is occurs primarily in the most competitive districts, again supporting the notion of expressive campaigning for particularly disadvantaged challengers.

Political Differences across the States

A second potential obstacle to generalizing from my 1996 interviews is in the geographically unrepresentative choice of interviews. As I note in chapter 3, the need for familiarity with a state or region’s political issues provides a compelling reason not to employ a random sample. Yet such a choice does cause problems in seeking to generalize. Accordingly, I also present the interviews here as a means of countering such objections.
Hence, a few brief words are in order on the level of political competition, the level of party strength, and the political culture of the Mid-Atlantic states of Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania as compared with the Midwestern states in which I conducted my 1996 interviews.

New Jersey resembles the strong party states of Ohio and Illinois that I considered in 1996 in several ways. It is the nation’s ninth-largest state, and it has historically had a strong yet evenly balanced party system that has lost influence over state-level or congressional politics in recent decades. It has historically been a battleground state in presidential elections but has recently been trending Democratic—the result, some argue, of a lack of a socially conservative base in its Republican Party (Barone, Cohen, and Ujifusa 2001, 974, 979). According to Zukin (1986, 11–15) New Jersey is anomalous because it has a highly educated, affluent (New Jersey has the second-highest per capita income in the nation) population yet its citizens know little about state political affairs because New Jersey has no major urban centers and is dependent upon New York and Philadelphia media for political news. New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the nation—it is 89 percent urban—yet it does exhibit an urban/rural split that is reflected in partisan divisions between the northern, more liberal sections of the state and a more rural Republican base. As noted above, however, New Jersey Republicans have tended to be somewhat more moderate than Republicans elsewhere, and issues such as the environment, education, and labor have tended to provoke defections among New Jersey Republicans from the national party. Strong Democratic machines in declining industrial cities such as Trenton, Camden, and Newark have been in decline, as have rural machines in the southern part of the state as New Jersey industry has turned toward developing pharmaceutical, telecommunications, and high-tech companies in the Princeton area (Moakley 1986). Because of its media dependence upon the large New York and Philadelphia markets, New Jersey is the second most expensive state in the nation in which to campaign, a phenomenon exemplified by the costly Torricelli and Corzine Senate races in recent years and the Bush campaign’s decision not to invest resources in New Jersey in 2000. At the House level, this has resulted in a smaller number of vigorously contested House races, a larger number of uncompetitive races, and a comparatively small number of somewhat competitive races. Finally, House races in New Jersey may also be anomalous because members of the New Jersey legislature are elected in odd-numbered years, ensuring the state legislators can run for the U.S. House without giving up their jobs. In New Jersey, redistricting is done by a ten-member, bipartisan commission; New Jersey did not gain or lose seats in 2002. Currently, the New Jersey
delegation includes six Republicans and seven Democrats, a figure unchanged in 2000 or 2002.

Pennsylvania is similar to New Jersey in its level of party organization, but the partisan divisions have been strikingly different. Both Democratic and Republican organizations have flourished in both the larger and the smaller cities in Pennsylvania, and both parties have also been relatively competitive with each other at the state level. As the *Almanac of American Politics* notes, however, Pennsylvania has made for an odd bellwether (Barone, Cohen, and Ujifusa 2001, 1298). Democrats in Pennsylvania have tended to be more conservative than national Democrats on cultural issues, and Republicans have tended to be more liberal than Republicans elsewhere on cultural matters. Pennsylvania is anchored by two large cities at either end of the state, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, with a large swath—dubbed the “T”—in between. Western Pennsylvania, historically a more Democratic area of mines and steel mills, has trended toward the Republican Party in recent years, while more cosmopolitan and suburban eastern Pennsylvania has trended toward the Democrats. This has made for anomalous switches in congressional voting—Democrats have captured seats in affluent Philadelphia suburbs, while Republicans have won seats in poorer, more blue-collar areas of the state. Pennsylvania has the fifth-largest population of any state in the nation, but has been steadily losing ground, and House seats, since the 1930s. The *Almanac* notes that Pennsylvania politics resembles the politics of the 1940s (Barone and Ujifusa 1997, 1196); Sorauf (1963, 7–15) noted in the 1960s that one aspect of this legacy has been the dominance of a nonideological, patronage-oriented politics. Prior to the 2000 election, Pennsylvanians held four committee chairs in the House, and many members used these chairs to provide substantial public-works benefits for their districts. In 2000 Pennsylvania had twenty-one House seats; with one seat change in 2000, Republicans had, for the first time in over a decade, a narrow majority of eleven seats to ten Democratic seats. Reapportionment cost Pennsylvania two seats, and the redistricting plan, written by a Republican legislature and a Republican governor, was expected well in advance to hurt Democrats (see Barone, Cohen, and Ujifusa 2001, 1298–99).

Delaware, according to Mayhew (1986, 66), exhibits strong party politics similar to the politics of New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Like New Jersey, it is dependent upon an out-of-state media market (Philadelphia) for political news, and like New Jersey it boasts a relatively affluent populace which is not concentrated in any major urban area. Delaware has also been politically competitive—it was the nation’s longest-running bellwether prior to 2000—with a pragmatic politics centered around support
for the state’s pharmaceutical and banking industries. Political divisions in the state arise between the more Democratic area of Wilmington, the state’s largest city, and more rural areas in the southern part of the state, with the affluent yet somewhat socially liberal area of New Castle County and the Wilmington suburbs holding the balance in statewide elections. Delaware is the lone state I consider with a single, at-large House seat; while Democrats now hold both Senate seats and the governorship, the House seat has been safely in Republican hands since 1992. While one might expect that state Democrats, given a lack of other House races to consider, would devote more attention to the state’s House seat, races against incumbent Rep. Mike Castle have been surprisingly low-key.

Finally, Maryland, though adjacent to Delaware and Pennsylvania, has a somewhat different political climate than the aforementioned three states. Maryland has traditionally been considered more akin to the southern border states in its politics. Accounts by Fenton (1957, 171–202) and Mayhew (1986, 84) have called attention to factionalization in the Maryland Democratic Party, as the Democratic machine in Baltimore has competed with a Democratic faction in the western part of the state. By most measures, Maryland is now one of the most Democratic states in the country, with all statewide offices held by Democrats from 1986 until 2002, an impregnable Democratic majority in the state legislature, and substantial margins for recent Democratic presidential contenders. Yet as of 2000 the state’s eight-member House delegation was evenly split between Democrats and Republicans. This was the result, some argue, of miscalculations on the part of the Democrats in the 1992 redistricting, in which a second majority-minority district was created but two Democrats were defeated running in their new districts (Barone and Ujifusa 1997, 661). Maryland has the largest black population outside of the Deep South, a large population of reliably Democratic federal and public employees, and the nation’s sixth-largest metropolitan area in Baltimore, the Baltimore suburbs, and the Washington, DC, suburbs. Historically, however, the Washington suburbs have played a small role in state politics, with most successful politicians at the state level arising from the Baltimore area. Current bases of Republican support include the more rural Eastern Shore and the Baltimore suburbs, while the poorer western area of the state has been more akin to the South, producing socially conservative Democrats and tending often to cross party lines and support Republicans.

Each of these states is classified as a 5, a strong party state, by Mayhew (1986, 46–66, 84–89), with the exception of Delaware, which rates a 4. One would expect an absence of the types of ideological parties I noted in the previous chapter in Wisconsin and Minnesota, and thus one would
expect that where party influence exists, it would be influence to adopt more pragmatic, centrist positions. These states contain a paucity of rural districts as compared with the four Midwestern states, and thus, perhaps, the nature of many of the issues should vary. In addition, one might expect that, on average, Republican candidates should be more moderate than Republicans in the Midwest. A primary difference between these states and the Midwestern states should be a lack of moderately competitive campaigns; in most of the districts in these states, media campaigns are extremely expensive, and apart from a small number of competitive districts centered around smaller cities in Pennsylvania, there should be few races where major media buys are not essential to victory for challengers.

The summary statistics in table 7.1 bear out this contention, and they also demonstrate areas of difference between the House races in these states and other races in 2000, as well as slight differences between the candidates I interviewed and all candidates in these states in 2000. As the table shows, my selection skews slightly toward Democrats, as compared with the aggregate numbers in these states, and it skews slightly toward more competitive races. Insofar as all groups are represented here, how-

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<tr>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>54.4% (255)</td>
<td>57.7% (30)</td>
<td>49.9% (200)</td>
<td>47.6% (20)</td>
<td>57.1% (8)</td>
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<td>Republicans</td>
<td>45.6% (214)</td>
<td>42.3% (22)</td>
<td>50.1% (201)</td>
<td>52.4% (22)</td>
<td>42.9% (6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Winners</td>
<td>15.5% (72)</td>
<td>11.5% (6)</td>
<td>9.4% (41)</td>
<td>7.1% (3)</td>
<td>14.3% (2)</td>
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<td>Long Shots</td>
<td>34.3% (161)</td>
<td>36.5% (17)</td>
<td>54.6% (219)</td>
<td>57.1% (24)</td>
<td>42.9% (6)</td>
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<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>39.9% (187)</td>
<td>38.5% (21)</td>
<td>30.2% (121)</td>
<td>21.4% (9)</td>
<td>21.4% (3)</td>
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<td>Competitive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Very Competitive</td>
<td>25.8% (121)</td>
<td>26.9% (14)</td>
<td>15.2% (61)</td>
<td>21.4% (9)</td>
<td>35.7% (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Open Seats</td>
<td>11.3% (49)</td>
<td>8.3% (4)</td>
<td>8.0% (35)</td>
<td>7.0% (3)</td>
<td>14.3% (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uncontested Seats</td>
<td>3.2% (14)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>15.8% (69)</td>
<td>9.3% (4)</td>
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<td>(Third-party candidates not included)</td>
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Table 7.1. 1996 and 2000 Candidates Compared
ever, this skewing should not substantially alter the generalizability of my interviews to the states as a group.

What Might We Expect to Be Different? What Might We Expect to Stay the Same?

As the above comments indicate, there are important differences between the 2000 elections and the 1996 elections, and between the political context of Mid-Atlantic states as opposed to Midwestern states. These differences, however, should have minimal effect upon the variables of importance to this study—information, issue positions, and party involvement. They do provide some extensions to the theory, but they do nothing to refute it.

We should not necessarily expect any difference in candidates’ information acquisition strategies across either time or place. In chapter 4 I argued that the only potential difference we might expect across candidates in information is that better-financed candidates might rely more heavily upon polling data. Insofar as polling data was rarely treated by candidates at any level of competitiveness as a source of information about voter preferences, however, and insofar as the degree of information about voter preferences necessary to candidates is different for candidates at different levels of competitiveness, difference in how well informed candidates are is not particularly relevant to the accuracy of their assessment of their chance of winning or of what positions, if any, will help them to win. Because the candidates I consider here are, on average, less competitive than my selection of 1996 candidates, we should see fewer candidates who were able to conduct extensive polls, but this change does little to affect my basic conclusions on information acquisition.

The nature of issue competition also should be little changed from 1996. As I note above, the only potential major issue that was not present to a roughly equal degree in 1996 is impeachment, and there is little evidence that the impeachment trial played a large role in more than a small number of 2000 races. While some candidates with whom I spoke mentioned that they had discussed their views on the president’s impeachment, even these few candidates acknowledged that it was not a major focus of their campaigns. There are certainly some differences in the issues raised that can be attributed to region—energy and mining issues in Pennsylvania, tobacco farming in Maryland, and so forth—but the presence of these issues should have little effect on overall ideological strategies or candidates’ reasons for running.
The involvement of the party campaign organizations in House elections did change noticeably between 1996 and 2000. Fewer seats were targeted by the parties, and there were only a small number of vigorously contested seats in the Mid-Atlantic states I consider here. Although one of the Maryland elections was close, none of the seats in Maryland or Delaware were a focus of attention for the DCCC or the NRCC. Three New Jersey seats and three Pennsylvania seats (of which one in each state was open) were targeted by the parties; I was able to interview candidates in three of these six races. If we consider the forty-five House seats in these states in comparison with the rest of the nation, the ratio of six of forty-five seats with substantial party involvement is not significantly different from Herrnson’s estimates of party involvement nationally, nor is the percentage of these seats among my interviewees. As I seek to show in my comments on the interviews, candidates’ reflections on the role of the national, state, and local parties also do not seem at odds with those of the 1996 candidates.

We are thus left with several more idiosyncratic factors which make these interviews a source of corroboration and of slight extension of my 1996 interviews. There are several factors unique to these states and to the 2000 elections that do go somewhat beyond my initial theory. First, in regards to the year, the impending redistricting and in particular the impending loss of two House seats in Pennsylvania ensured that many of the challengers were looking toward the 2002 elections in their campaigns. In Pennsylvania, some candidates could be expected to view their 2000 bids in part as a means of establishing their bona fides with their party in the event that redistricting rendered their district more sympathetic to their party. The same could also be expected to hold true in Maryland, where Democratic challengers took pains to point out to me that Maryland is now the most Democratic state in the nation in terms of state legislative partisanship, yet its U.S. House delegation was evenly split between the parties.

Other factors are state-specific. All four states had Senate races in 2000; three of these four (all but Maryland’s) were at least moderately competitive. There is one at-large seat in this group; although one might expect that the presence of only one House race would increase the attention paid by the state parties to this seat, in fact this race was largely ignored. Two states considered here—Maryland and New Jersey—did not hold elections to state office in 2000. New Jersey holds elections in odd-numbered years and Maryland holds elections for both houses every four years—most recently, in 1998. This ensures that the strategic calculus for state legislators is not the same as it is in states where they would need to
give up their seats in order to run—they have less to lose—and may result in a larger number of experienced candidates running in less competitive races that they would otherwise sit out. Finally, the proximity of these states—particularly Maryland—to Washington, DC, may ensure that even among challengers who have not held elected office there is a larger-than-expected number of challengers who have significant knowledge of congressional politics and congressional experience, as lobbyists or staff. These geographic peculiarities would seem to indicate that we may see more politically savvy candidates in the types of races where we would not necessarily expect them in other states. The fact that expressive campaigning still seems present in the majority of these campaigns indicates that this phenomenon will be with us for some time.

The 2000 Candidates

Let us first consider the variables discussed in the previous three chapters, with an eye toward identifying similarities or differences between the 1996 Midwestern candidates considered in the three previous chapters and this chapter’s 2000 Mid-Atlantic candidates.

Information

In chapter 4 I noted two features among my 1996 interviewees. First, as one moves from less competitive to more competitive candidates, the use of sophisticated public opinion polling techniques increases. This is unsurprising; it is a function of resources. Second, however, in that chapter I also provide evidence that candidates with access to public opinion data cannot be said to be better informed, in any way relevant to their chance of winning, than are those without such data. This is so because candidates do not use public opinion data as a source of information about voter preferences. Among those candidates with public opinion information at hand, polls are viewed as a tool for acquiring party support, as a means of garnering attention in the media, and, hopefully, as a campaign tool to be used against their opponents. That is, a favorable showing in a poll can be presented to potential supporters, or it can be trumpeted in order to persuade the public that a candidate is indeed viable. Candidates of all levels of competitiveness draw upon their own background in the district, the views of voters or political elites in the district, or upon the incumbent’s past record as a means of learning public sentiment. This type
of information is easily available to all. Furthermore, the simple knowledge that one is highly unlikely to win no matter how well one represents public views is, in itself, a piece of information which may trump all of the other, more subtle, aspects of voter preferences.

Among the 2000 candidates with whom I spoke, I encountered views which paralleled those of the 1996 candidates quite closely. Among these candidates, as well as among 2000 candidates more generally, there was a much greater percentage of “have-nots” than was the case in 1996. As a result, an even smaller number had access to polling data than was the case in 1996. Half (seven of fourteen) of the candidates with whom I spoke conducted any polls, none of the long-shot candidates, two of the three somewhat competitive candidates, and all of the very competitive candidates. Among the long shots and the somewhat competitive candidates, there were some who had access to polls previous candidates had done in their district. As one remarked, “[The previous challenger] took a zillion polls, and he told me privately, ‘Don’t waste your money doing that.’ It doesn’t tell you a great deal. If you really don’t know whether you’re winning or losing, and you’ve got a lot of money to throw around, then maybe. But it costs a lot of dough. . . . I never had a choice anyway” (Pennsylvania).

Long-shot candidates drew instead upon means ranging from consideration of past voting trends to sentiments expressed in public gatherings to gain a sense of what voters wanted:

If you do the analysis of the numbers, it might be possible to get 52 percent of the vote here. You go back to the 1992 presidential vote, and look at how the different counties vote and how they changed. . . . On issues, you can do the same thing. For example, on HMOs, 10,000 people were dumped from their HMO coverage, and there could be 30,000 to 40,000 people who know somebody who was cut, so you know at least that many people care about that issue. (Pennsylvania)

One of my supporters was a professor of English at the community college in the area and asked me to come talk to his students. I asked them several questions from a Pew Foundation survey, and then we talked about a whole bunch of those issues. They were very talkative—I learned several lessons from that. (Pennsylvania)

Among the somewhat competitive candidates, as was the case in 1996, there was more of a struggle to acquire polling information, but the intent of this acquisition was more to influence the DCCC or the NRCC than it was to learn about voters’ positions for campaigning purposes: “We did a
standard poll with about 350 responses, and when the pollster had seen the preliminary results he upped it to 400 so there was no way people could criticize the poll. It showed [the incumbent] with 37 percent reelect numbers. I thought we could go out and raise money based on those numbers, but we couldn’t get anybody interested” (Maryland).

Finally, the very competitive candidates included three who were recipients of extensive support from their parties and two who were not. The two who were not targets both did manage to raise enough money to do extensive polling—one was largely self-financed and the other received heavy labor support—but both also noted that their polls were primarily designed to be persuasive. The three targeted candidates spoke of polling as the very competitive 1996 candidates did; they were able to conduct several polls, they often disseminated their results strategically, and they often were able to keep a running tally of how the campaign was faring in response to major advertising buys of their own or of their opponent. The campaign manager for one victorious candidate actually had a poster of the trends in the campaign’s tracking polls on display in his office to note the consistency in polling results throughout the campaign. Several of these candidates also noted that they had paid extremely close attention to presidential polls in the area and had set expectations about how well George W. Bush or Al Gore needed to do in their districts for their campaigns to be helped.

In sum, information acquisition and use strategies in 2000 were similar to those of the 1996 candidates with whom I spoke. Polling was actually more frequent among the highly competitive candidates I consider here than it was among the most competitive candidates in 1996; this may be a function of the large campaign budgets of several of the 2000 candidates. There is little evidence, however, that candidates with less public opinion information were at a disadvantage because they were unable to measure public opinion accurately. Likewise, few of the candidates admitted to doing anything more than tweaking their message slightly on account of any information they gathered through polling. The less competitive candidates had creative and often unorthodox means of gathering information about voter preferences, but they did not appear to have been led astray by this information; in most cases, they learned that their campaigns had little support among voters, and this piece of information rendered more precise measurements of public opinion relatively useless.
Although some of the issues of relevance changed between 1996 and 2000, the broader issues strategies of candidates did not. Among the 1996 candidates, as I noted in chapter 5, candidates of different competitiveness levels exhibited distinct patterns—uncompetitive candidates made little effort to discover the incumbent’s strengths or weaknesses and generally ran their campaigns with little regard to the incumbent; somewhat competitive candidates exhibited the strongest attempts at convergence of any of the candidate types, although in many cases only because, in their opinion, the incumbent had co-opted their issues; and the most competitive challengers were able to point out issue differences with the incumbent in large part because the incumbent did have issue vulnerabilities. Among open-seat candidates it seems that candidates seek to converge on the most prominent issues. Similar patterns exist among the 2000 candidates.

Again, there is substantial divergence among the least competitive candidates, in part because the least competitive candidates have little intent or hope of engaging the incumbent in debate on the issues. For instance, the following three candidates are clearly running expressive campaigns:

I think there are different philosophies between the parties. There are many issues that I disagreed with [the incumbent] on, particularly on taxes. Some of these affected a large part of the district, but others didn’t. It was not a personal vendetta on my part against [the incumbent] or his party. I just feel that opposition whether you win or lose is healthy. (New Jersey)

The Democrats right now don’t talk much about religion. That was one of my reasons for getting into the race, because there’s no real reason in my mind for separation of church and state. I believe God should be part of our decision making, and my campaign was about sticking to my guns about that, even if the voters or my party didn’t like that philosophy. (Delaware)

There were a lot of issues that I did not bring up because that would be attacking him. I tried to sell myself rather than attack the congressman because again, remember that you’re working on the fundamental belief that you’re not going to win, although you don’t tell anybody that. (Pennsylvania)
The somewhat competitive candidates, as was the case in 1996, were more frustrated with their lack of success in raising issues. Many Democrats, for instance, reported that they had thought the Clinton impeachment would be a particularly divisive issue but that it did not resonate with voters. Others spoke of their uphill climb in trying to persuade voters that, in their opinion, the incumbent was not as much of a “moderate” as voters may have thought. The somewhat competitive races did feature more similar candidates than did several others. As one Republican-turned-Democrat remarked of his opponent, “He’s about as progressive as a Republican can be on some issues. There are areas where our views coincide, but there are significant areas where we disagreed. I wanted to get through this campaign talking entirely about issues. The scenario was that while he expressed strong support for some issues, how he voted was different in Washington, more along the lines of traditional Republicans. We had some success on that, but clearly not enough” (Pennsylvania).

Finally, the most competitive candidates were often able to point out substantial disagreements and adopt strategies that diverged sharply from those of their opponents, in part because the incumbents did seem to be somewhat mismatched with their districts. As one Democratic challenger remarked,

The only way to run against her, I felt—and this was borne out in our polling as well—was not to knock her. She’s basically a moderate-voting individual who doesn’t do anything, but she has tremendous name recognition and she’s nice. But there were a lot of issues I could go after her on. She supports the death penalty, I don’t. She supported some of the tax cuts, I don’t. On a lot of issues, she waffles, but this is now the Democrats’ seat to lose, so I could say exactly what I wanted and talk about the issues. (Maryland)

Another very competitive challenger had similar comments on his lack of a need to compromise: “I just spoke my mind. I can’t do it any other way. To be very honest with you, I think that’s what got me as far as I got. He said he was running on his record, and I said fine, so am I—I’m running on his record too. Because I think this is a Democratic district” (Pennsylvania).

For many analysts, campaigns at all levels in 2000 were somewhat devoid of issues (see, e.g., McWilliams 2001). As was the case in 1996, however, the starkest differences between the candidates on issues occurred in relatively uncompetitive races. It is only in these races that both candidates have the luxury of establishing strong issue positions. It is in these races
that we see expressive campaigning on the part of the challengers, the rais-
ing of issues because of a belief in the importance of those issues for their
own sake. In the more competitive challenges to incumbents, we again see
the spectacle of challengers searching for issues to use against a rather ill-
defined incumbent, or of challengers seeking to differentiate themselves on
issues without adopting unpopular positions. Insofar as there were fewer
candidates in 2000 in the two upper competitiveness categories, it would
stand to reason that expressive campaigning was on the rise in 2000.

The Role of the Parties

In chapter 6 I noted disparities in the levels of party support for candidates
of different levels of competitiveness. This, in itself, is unsurprising. What
is more noteworthy, however, is that less competitive candidates do have
the ability to draw upon the resources of their parties. They make greater
use of “free” party information—they are likely to see their parties as a
means of gathering issue information, and they are often counseled in their
campaigns by local party officials and, at times, by members of their par-
ties’ congressional delegations. The type and level of this assistance varies
across states, as does the amount of pressure exerted by the party to adopt
any particular set of issue positions. In states with traditionally weaker
parties, such as Wisconsin and Minnesota, parties can exert pressure upon
candidates at all levels to adopt noncentrist positions; in states with tradi-
tionally stronger parties, such as Illinois and Ohio, parties exert no pres-
sure upon less competitive candidates and can at times help steer more
competitive candidates toward the political center. In this latter case, any
steering does not represent ideological pressure as much as it entails the
sharing of information on how to exploit an opponent’s weak spots most
effectively. Among the middling candidates, those on the bubble of receiv-
ing party support, the most tension emerges between the parties and their
candidates; in such cases, candidates were most critical of their parties’
choices about whom to back and felt the most pressure to “produce,” to
meet party fundraising targets or polling targets.

It is in the area of party support that one might expect the 2000 can-
didates to differ most from the candidates I interviewed in 1996. The
states I selected in 2000 all have a history of strong, competitive political
parties; the potential exceptions to the trends of 1996 in Ohio and Illinois
would be Delaware, where the lone challenger had an absence of competi-
tion for state-level party resources, and Maryland, a state with a weak Re-
publican Party and a Democratic Party that has seen conflict between
party organizations in Baltimore and elsewhere in the state. What is notable in 2000 is the relative absence of a role for the party in the majority of races in the states with the strongest party systems, the fact that the Democratic Party intervened unsuccessfully in the primaries in two of these states' open-seat races, and the fact that some of the most competitive candidates were not running in races targeted by their party.

None of the long-shot candidates with whom I spoke in 2000 had a prior history of holding electoral office, although most had been party activists or held unelected public office. One of these candidates had previously run as the nominee of the Reform Party, while another subsequently capitalized upon his House campaign to win election as a county commissioner. In contrast, one of the three somewhat competitive candidates was a New Jersey state legislator while the other two were current or former House staff members. Three of the five very competitive candidates were elected officials; the other two included a prominent union official and a former Senate staff member turned Washington lobbyist. Of the five very competitive candidates, the three current or former elected officials were targeted by their party while the other two, although they raised substantial amount of money from organized interests, were not party targets.

The long-shot candidates reported some dissatisfaction with their party's level of assistance but were realistic about having no expectation of party support:

They had information available for candidates. They have Web sites you can have access to. There's a lot of people running, so obviously you're not going to get 100 percent personalized attention, but I think to some degree they'll help a person develop what kind of issues they want to run on and what's important to that particular person. (New Jersey)

In an area like this, which is 100 percent Republican, they just leave their candidates blowing in the wind. They don't say, well, let's give him a little, maybe we'll get some exposure. I would call the DCCC regularly and they would give me previews [of party events in the district], but that was all. (Pennsylvania)

These candidates reported receiving advice and reported being told frankly by national or state party officials early in their campaigns not to expect financial assistance; for the most part, the greatest assistance received by these candidates was invitations to either speak or at least hand out campaign literature at rallies for the presidential or senatorial candidates.
Somewhat competitive candidates, as was the case in 1996, exhibited the greatest frustration with their parties; many of these candidates reported early, positive discussions with their parties, only to fail to receive assistance that they had felt they might expect. It was in these races that candidates believed themselves to be losing out to neighboring, inferior candidates. In Pennsylvania, for instance, many Democratic candidates griped about the extent of DCCC support for the party’s two targeted nonincumbents, challenger Patrick Casey and open-seat candidate Terry Van Horne, and many Republican candidates complained about NRCC support for challenger Stewart Greenleaf and open-seat candidate Melissa Hart. The Van Horne/Hart race, in fact, perhaps because it wound up not being particularly close (Hart won with 59 percent of the vote), inspired gripes from candidates of both parties that the DCCC and NRCC had paid too much attention to a race that was destined to be an easy Republican victory. Even candidates outside of Pennsylvania pointed to this race as an example of misguided targeting priorities for both parties, albeit particularly for Democrats. Resentment over this race was compounded by the fact that the preferred candidate of the DCCC failed to win the primary and Van Horne was judged by many to be a seriously flawed candidate.

Somewhat competitive candidates were the quickest to allege that their races could have been competitive had their parties fully understood the dynamics of the district: “Over time, because [the incumbent] has won, people have sort of taken on an exaggerated sense of how conservative the district is. So the local party is demoralized, and they don’t put in the effort that they should. The state party is the same way. Maryland was a given for Al Gore and Paul Sarbanes, and they should have said we don’t need to help those guys, let’s see if there are any races this year where our efforts will pay off” (Maryland).

Many of these candidates reported that their party, for better or for worse, was best viewed as an assortment of individual politicians’ organizations. This provided an opportunity for help where individuals were sympathetic, but it was an impediment to drawing upon an established group of individuals or source of campaign assistance and information:

There isn’t really a New Jersey Democratic Party. It’s a bunch of individual fiefdoms. You’ve got the Torricelli fiefdom, the Lautenberg fiefdom, the Pallone fiefdom. . . . Torricelli and Pallone were helpful in fundraising and getting me to events. The official Democratic Party county chairs talk big, but they can’t really do very much. (New Jersey)
The Democratic Party here isn’t particularly strong. There’s a perception that they were stronger when [a previous Democratic incumbent] held the district, but in reality there were three organizations—the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, and [the former incumbent’s] own organization. That’s just the way people are. They’re attached to an individual candidate or campaign. (Pennsylvania)

Finally, the highly competitive candidates who did receive party support all reported complete satisfaction with the level of support they received, and all reported that this support had no issue-related strings attached to it. While in Pennsylvania and New Jersey there were three races apiece targeted by the parties, none of these candidates reported a sense of competition for attention with the other targeted campaigns:

The NRCC was very fair to us. One advantage we had was our consultant was doing both of the most important Republican races [in the state]. We knew everything that was going on in the other races. They were very different campaigns, but there was a lot of intermingling. I think the NRCC liked that too, because this campaign was very focused on what was going on in New Jersey. In 1998 they were all over the place, but this year the message was tailored to the individual local districts, which I think was what Denny Hastert was going for. (New Jersey)

We were complaining about how they shouldn’t spend money . . . on whom, I don’t recall. You can always find somebody else’s campaign who’s being supported who you think doesn’t need the money either because they’re safe or they don’t have a chance. But I don’t have a lot to complain about with the NRCC. My staff was pulling their chain, but that’s really just part of their job. (New Jersey)

Both of the highly competitive candidates who were not running in targeted races noted a lack of constraints from their party on the issues they raised and both admitted to running campaigns that diverged sharply from the incumbent’s on issues. In terms of their own satisfaction with the issue focus of their campaigns, these candidates exhibited a high level of satisfaction, but both also admitted a frustration with the party’s role akin to the views of the somewhat competitive candidates:

The decision on this race was made before it even started. The Democratic Party believes its own press—that this is a race nobody can win—and it becomes self-fulfilling. There were some real issue differences here, but
they didn’t pay attention to the issue differences. That’s a tremendous advantage for an incumbent. . . . [But] that allowed me to be free. What did I have to lose? I could say exactly what I wanted when I talked about the issues. People like that kind of straight talk. I’m lucky because I didn’t have to pander. (Maryland)

Let’s face it, you’re sitting back in Washington and you hear there’s another local union person running, you gotta prove yourself, and you’ve gotta raise money. I hit every target they set. I think at first they looked at this as a seat they could win, but in the final analysis, did I get the support from the DCCC I should have received? No. In a way I understand that, but in a way I don’t understand. Where I got beat wasn’t a lot that was going to change those people. To be very honest with you, I just spoke my mind in the campaign, and that’s what got me as far as I got. (Pennsylvania)

Both of these candidates, then, had the luxury of running expressive campaigns, and both demonstrate that, under certain circumstances (a vulnerable incumbent, a lack of attention from the party) such campaigns can result in upsets and propel to Washington candidates who differ dramatically from their predecessors. Although both lost, both outperformed many of the targeted candidates nationwide, and their campaigns attest both to the potential fallibility of parties’ targeting decisions and to the potential for expressive campaigning to produce results felt within the Beltway. They indicate that expressive campaigning can potentially bring candidates to Washington, but in addition, their campaigns may, both candidates hope, result in useable information for them, their parties, or other party candidates in subsequent elections. Both candidates indicated that they were either thinking of running again in 2002 (one did, albeit unsuccessfully), were involved in attempting to recruit candidates for 2002, or, at a minimum, that they had evidence that their campaigns would prompt their parties to take a closer look at the district in the future.

Two factors are noticeably absent from the comments of all of the 2000 candidates. First, none made reference to any coat-tail effects for either Bush or Gore. Virtually uniformly, Republicans noted that, in fact, Bush had underperformed relative to the vote percentage they expected him to receive in their district, yet they hastened to point out that they did not believe this affected their campaigns. The two victorious Republican candidates both had set goals for how well they believed Bush would need to do for them to win their races, and in both cases they won despite Bush’s failure to reach these targets. Among the three unsuccessful highly
competitive candidates, as well as the less competitive candidates, all said that they had done better than they would have expected given their party’s presidential candidate’s showing in their districts. Second, no candidates reported pressure from their parties, at whatever level, to adopt particular issue positions. Some candidates noted that they believed their opponents may have been pressured by their parties to adopt positions they would not otherwise have taken. The closest any candidates came to noting any party pressure was the former Reform Party nominee, who stated that he felt Democrats had been particularly suspicious of him initially because his positions in the past had been at odds with traditional Democratic positions.

Overall, the comments on parties are substantially similar to those of the 1996 candidates. Candidates’ thoughts on the information they acquired about the issue preferences of the voters, the strategy behind their own issue focus, and the role of the parties seem to indicate that the findings I have drawn out are relatively consistent across time and across regions of the country. While one might not necessarily expect the main themes of chapters 4, 5, and 6 to change dramatically across time or region of the country, these interviews provide evidence that expressive campaigning is certainly a general characteristic of most congressional campaigns. The interviews do not, of course, exhaust all potential variations in campaigns—one might, for instance, look at midterm elections, or at other distinct regions of the country—but they do indicate that the races I considered in the Midwest in 1996 are not atypical.

New Wrinkles

While politics and political culture in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey do not appear to exert any effects on the candidates here that put them in a substantially different light than the Midwestern candidates I considered in 1996, there are, as I note, a few smaller differences among these candidates that one might expect to alter the types of campaigns waged. The presence of an at-large district in this sample might have indicated that this is a district that state-level political actors would pay more attention to; the fact that this was not the case—the Delaware district has not been competitive for several elections—shows the limited interest state or local parties have in House elections.

The fact that state legislators in Maryland and New Jersey were not up for reelection in 2000—and thus had less to lose by running for Congress—may have led to more competitive races than one would expect in some
districts. This may indeed have happened in some districts; at least three districts that I consider, as well as at least three that I did not consider from these states, featured candidates from one of these two categories. The fact that three relatively uncompetitive Maryland and New Jersey districts featured politically experienced challengers may attest to this; it may indicate that strategic politicians ran in some of these races despite steep odds against success, and it may therefore indicate that we should expect more policy convergence in these races. This phenomenon may have inflated challenger vote totals, pushing some races from the “long-shot” to the “somewhat competitive” category. The same holds true for the two suburban Maryland districts that drew current or former congressional staff members or lobbyists—here, political experience, albeit in nonelected office, is at less of a premium. If these peculiarities do betoken greater competition, though, this would in fact indicate that in other areas of the country the 2000 House races would actually have been prone to be more lopsided, and more prone to producing expressive candidates, than my interviews here show.

One factor of the 2000 races, however, is of particular importance if we are to assess the overall competitiveness of House races and the potential role of expressive campaigning in the future. One would expect that the fewer districts that are targeted by the parties and the more narrowly spread resources are for challengers, the greater the number of issue-oriented, noncentrist expressive campaigns. One might infer from Jacobson’s (2001) argument that the relative paucity of competitive House races in 2000 was due to the confluence of three factors—the growing cost of waging a competitive House race and the secular trend toward a smaller number of races focused upon by the parties; the slender Republican majority in the House during the 106th Congress and the correspondingly small number of seats the Democrats would need to capture to gain the majority; and the decade-long trend of redistricting cycles, in which turnover tends to be lowest in years ending in zero, only to increase following the redrawing of House districts.

These three factors are, of course, relevant to the amounts of strategic and expressive campaigning in any election year. The secular trend argument would lead us to believe expressive campaigns should continue to increase in number. The balance of power in the House would indicate that expressive campaigning should remain with us, to its present degree, for at least the next election cycle or until one party establishes a substantial majority in the House. Yet if 2000 was a year in which many potential challengers, as well as their parties, sought to wait until districts were redrawn, we might infer that expressive campaigning is a phenomenon that wanes and waxes over the course of each decade.
Three of the four states I considered in 2000 were facing an impending redistricting, and in two of them, a dramatic reshuffling of districts was expected. In Delaware, of course, there would be no redistricting, and in New Jersey few candidates expected redistricting to dramatically alter the existing districts. Pennsylvania, however, was to lose two House seats by the 2002 election, and the clear intentions of the Republican state legislative majority and Republican governor to seek greater advantage for Republicans in the House led to much speculation on the part of the candidates with whom I spoke. In Maryland, the apparent discrepancy between the state’s unbalanced partisanship and balanced House delegation also prompted speculation on the part of the candidates about what their fortunes might be in a subsequent run or what lessons state legislators might have learned from their campaigns that would affect redistricting. Some of the candidates with whom I spoke in 1996 alluded to a two-election strategy for gaining office. The fact that in 2002 many districts would be altered led to a different type of two-election strategy, in which some candidates viewed 2000 as their only chance, after which the incumbent might be drawn into a safer district if threatened, while others felt that a strong showing in 2000 might prompt sympathetic legislators to attempt to draw districts in which they would be more likely to oust the incumbent in 2002.

Apart from looking at the unique circumstances of the individual states, it is also important, for one final time, to isolate the competitiveness categories in order to look at what perspectives candidates should have on redistricting. Long-shot candidates should have little reason to have any personal stake in redistricting; their districts would have to become dramatically different for them to anticipate more favorable circumstances in a subsequent bid for office, and even if this is to be the case, they ought not to expect their party’s nomination if the district does become competitive. Somewhat competitive candidates may well be mulling over a subsequent bid should their district be drawn to their party’s advantage. The most competitive candidates might be anticipated to be ambivalent; for some, a better district could certainly put them over the top, but they might not find this necessary to believe they have a chance in the future. And, obviously, candidates who won would likely prefer the district to remain the same or to become slightly more favorable to them but not to have the district dramatically redrawn.

Matters do play out in this fashion among the candidates whom I interviewed. While several of the long-shot candidates speculated about what the future might bring in terms of redistricting, they did not indicate that redistricting would influence their own fortunes. These candidates
were most likely to talk about fairness, about the overall composition of their state’s delegation, or about improving their party’s chances in the district or elsewhere without reference to future candidacies of their own:

I would hope that this county would become one district. I know that they will try to strengthen the Republican control of Congress through redistricting, and I’m afraid that our county will be divided between three districts. That would be a disaster because we wouldn’t have any representation. We’d just be being used for the northern part of the county for votes against [a neighboring incumbent]. (Pennsylvania Democrat)

I don’t think I’ll have a chance to run again in that the governor’s plan will prevail. He’ll get his way and we’ll have three Republican congressmen from up here. It’s a political move, obviously, but anyone who opposes it and who’s a Republican partisan is at the minimum on the horns of a dilemma. (Pennsylvania Republican)

Meanwhile, somewhat competitive candidates generally admitted to be toying with the idea of another run and hoping that their views on future redistricting decisions would be taken into account. In Democrat-controlled Maryland, for instance, one Democratic candidate who subsequently ran again in 2002 remarked: “I’m definitely considering running again. We’re actually putting together a group, meeting with the county committee chairs and the senators’ staffs. We’re going to analyze where we did well, where we fell short, to build a plan. We’ve got a four-to-four delegation in a heavily Democratic state where the incumbents win 87, 86, 77, and 65 percent, so it doesn’t take a genius to figure out what you need to do to win more districts” (Maryland).

In Pennsylvania, where Democrats expected to lose at least some of the few competitive districts they held, one somewhat competitive Democrat was more sanguine, mixing “fairness” motives and personal motives: “The uniqueness of this district is that since the redistricting of 1960, the district has been this county plus something. You don’t find too many congressional districts that are identified with one county. There’s always been an attempt to keep it that way, and there should be, but this time there probably will not be. It’s a fast-growing area, so it has to change in some way. As a Democrat, it probably is not going to change to my benefit” (Pennsylvania).

Among the most competitive candidates, the prognosis of what was likely to happen in terms of partisan control was similar in each of these states, although candidates’ own forecasts about their future seemed less
dependent on redistricting. The campaign manager for a victorious Pennsyl-
vania Republican noted that some lobbying to preserve the district or
slightly improve it was already underway: “It’s not going to get any worse.
If there was a Democratic majority that controlled the legislature, they
could carve up our district. But since one district in the Pittsburgh area has
to be done away with, the rest have to be expanded. We would like to pick
up a number of constituents she represented in the state senate. Being a
former state senator, she clearly has ties to the state legislature. Given the
makeup, I think it will be a slightly more favorable district” (Pennsylva-
nia).

Finally, somewhat competitive and very competitive candidates in
New Jersey concurred that there was little chance New Jersey’s new dis-
tricts would aid challengers of either party; again, they mixed normative
views on how redistricting should work with glum assessments of any fu-
ture benefits to them:

I think districts should be as compact as is mathematically possible, that
gerrymandering should be impossible. The more I study redistricting, the
more I think people are going to abuse it. We have a bipartisan com-
mission which does this, which usually means it will be a bipartisan gerry-
mander, which usually means an incumbent protection gerrymander. The
most vulnerable Democrat and the two most vulnerable Republicans are
adjacent to each other, so there are all kinds of mutually advantageous
deals that can be made. I think it will be a go-along, get-along situation,
so I’m not real optimistic with regards to the district being as competitive
as it is now. I don’t mind if I’m wrong, since I don’t intend to be here next
year, but I think it’s important for the national party that we have more
districts in New Jersey that can be won by Republicans. (New Jersey)

In previous chapters, I did note that some candidates were willing to
engage in campaigns in order not necessarily to win, but to run against ex-
pectations in hopes of gaining more support in a subsequent bid. Such can-
idates would be likely to adopt vote-maximizing strategies even toward a
losing end. To the extent that an impending redistricting might lure candi-
dates into the 2000 race, we would again expect fewer expressive cam-
paigns in affected states in 2000. Only one group of candidates in this
study, however, could realistically expect such an outcome—Maryland De-
mocrats. Of these four candidates, two (whom I did not interview) clearly
had such a low chance of victory that they would have been unlikely to
gain from redistricting; we are thus left with only two candidates who
might have expected future benefits from redistricting. For the majority of
2000 challengers affected by redistricting among my interviewees, then, an impending redistricting seems likely to discourage intentions of building upon a coalition and, thus, more likely to encourage expressive campaigning.

Conclusions

The 2000 nonincumbent candidate interviews provide support for the argument advanced in the preceding chapters regarding the relative lack of candidate convergence in House elections. They indicate that the vast majority of House candidates, from the least competitive to the most competitive, design their campaigns in accordance with their beliefs about their probability of winning. In the majority of these races, candidates know that they have little or no chance of winning, and they adopt issue strategies accordingly. These candidates tend not to be motivated by the prospect of winning, and they adopt positions that can be rather extreme relative to the median voter in the district. Candidates do so because they wish to express ideas that would otherwise go unheard, to rally fellow partisans, or to educate voters. Although it is not possible to predict how frequent such campaigns will be in the future, a variety of trends noticeable when comparing the 2000 elections with those of 1996 indicate that as the number of competitive House races has declined, the frequency of expressive congressional campaigns would logically seem to have increased. Even apart from the unusually uncompetitive redistricting year of 2002, secular and less cyclical trends indicate that these types of races will remain a major part of the American political landscape for some time to come.

What is the impact of unbalanced competition in American House races? What might the impact be in the future? In the next chapter, I evaluate the normative consequences of these types of campaigns and of the prevalence of unbalanced, uncompetitive elections more generally.