Electoral Strategies and Political Marketing

Edited by

Shaun Bowler
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science,
University of California

and

David M. Farrell
Jean Monnet Lecturer in European Politics,
Department of Government, University of Manchester

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10 The USA: The 1990 Congressional Campaign

Richard S. Katz and Robin Kolodny

SETTING AND NATIONAL CONTEXT

Discussions of American election campaigns focus typically on the presidency. In this chapter we focus on congressional elections. As elections to legislative chambers they are more directly comparable to the parliamentary elections that are the concern of most of the other chapters of this volume. Each presidential election involves either a sitting president or does not, a vitally important contextual variable that, due to the constitutional limitation on presidential re-election, is often known years in advance. While this is true also for individual congressional seats (except that there are no limits to congressional service with some members serving for thirty years or more), each overall congressional election involves a mix of incumbent re-election bids and open seats. In contrast to the idiosyncratic nature of presidential elections in which the personalities, policies and records of two national candidates receive massive news coverage, congressional elections are the aggregation of many races most of which receive little individual media attention. As a result, in contrast to the highly individual nature of a presidential election, an election of the Congress, in which the effects of individual candidates and constituency circumstances can be expected to 'average out,' has the potential to be a contest between parties rather than simply between individual candidates and so is a better venue for assessing the role of party organisations in the campaign process and, perhaps, also for assessing trends in party support.

Although presidential elections appear to be contested by parties, this is only nominally so. The role of the national party organisations has always been limited, but since the 1974 Federal Election Campaign Act Amendments this situation has been formalised. The national
party organisations are prohibited from backing any particular candidate for the presidential nomination during the primary and caucus season. The nominating conventions themselves now do little more than confirm the results of primary elections in which anyone can run and in which voting, far from being restricted to party members (there being none in the United States), is often open to people with no, or even the opposing, party allegiance. Once the nominations are made, the party national committee may run the campaign of a candidate who accepts public funding only if the candidate designates that national committee as his or her campaign committee and, even if so designated, in practice usually is in effect a vessel to contain the candidate's personal organisation from the primary campaign. Rarely is the person who was national chairman at the beginning of a presidential year still in office a few weeks after the nominating convention unless it has simply renominated a sitting president.

In fact the basic theme of this chapter is that congressional elections are not primarily national contests between parties either, but (although either characterisation carried to its extreme would be an exaggeration) are better described as simultaneous constituency-level contests between pairs of candidates who incidentally have party labels and patronise a common core of purveyors of campaign services. This lack of 'partyness' is typical of congressional conduct of legislative business, with relatively few votes dividing a majority of one party from a majority of the other and with the average party unity scores (the percentage of the time the member votes with the majority of his/her party) on those votes that do divide the parties barely halfway between the theoretical minimum of 0.5 and a perfect 1.0; it is similarly pronounced, looking at support for the proposals of the president. In this context it is easy to wonder whether congressional elections can be interpreted either as choices between parties or as referenda on the president's performance (Campbell, 1960; Kernell, 1977; Tuft, 1975). This last point is of particular relevance because our detailed subject is a mid-term congressional election (where the presidency is not at stake). While we are not directly concerned with the tendency of the president's party to lose seats at mid-term elections, it forms part of the strategic context in which the 1990 election was fought. An additional contextual factor is that 1990 was the last election before the constitutionally mandated reapportionment and redistricting to be based on the 1990 census. While this had no direct impact on the Senate it meant that virtually every House district

(the exceptions being those states with only one representative) was likely to change and could be changed substantially before those who won in 1990 would stand for re-election.

Before assessing the role of party organisations in congressional campaigns it is first necessary to identify them. Often the national committee of each party is taken to be the party organisation. In fact each of the two major American parties has two additional independent and coequal committees, the Democracy Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) and National Republican Campaign Committee (NRCC) in the House of Representatives and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC) and National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) in the Senate. While each party's committees share the goal of maximising partisan presence by electoral means, the similarities end there. Both their constituencies and their functions differ. The National Committee nominally is responsible to and composed of representatives of the state parties, although the national committee of the president's party generally is dominated, and its chairman named, by him. Its primary responsibility is the presidential election although it also provides technical and other assistance to state and local parties. The House and Senate committees, on the other hand, are creatures of their respective party caucuses and are primarily concerned with the election of members of their own chambers. All the party committees offer candidates (incumbents and challengers) support in both cash and 'in-kind' contributions, subject to various statutory limitations. The two questions, both of which we would answer in the negative at least in the case of congressional elections, are whether any or all of these committees make contributions to individual campaigns that are large enough or central enough, and whether the actions of the committees are sufficiently coordinated or controlling, for the campaign to be described as a 'party campaign'.

Both the impact of legal restrictions on party support of candidates and the more specific strategic problems of campaigning for the House are quite different from those of campaigning for the Senate. Looking first at the general differences, senators, and especially first time senatorial candidates, are usually far more experienced, more widely known and often personally richer than their House counterparts. A typical senatorial district (that is a state) will include many media markets; an urban House district will often represent only a fraction of a single market. Aside from making the decision whether to buy media time easier for a senatorial candidate, this also means that senatorial campaigns are more likely to be regarded as newsworthy.
One consequence is that the two party committees in one of the chambers resemble one another far more in both structure and in operation than do any pair of committees in the same party. Such differences are both reflected in and compounded by differences in campaign regulation. The Federal Election Campaign Act allows party committees to make two kinds of direct expenditures on behalf of their candidates. First, each committee is allowed to make a cash contribution of $5000 per House candidate per election (primary, general, special); for Senate candidates there is a combined party limit of $17,500. Second, in general elections only, the parties are also allowed to make ‘coordinated expenditures’ – expenditures made directly by the parties but with the knowledge and consent of the candidate. In House races the limit is $10,000 plus Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) ($25,140 in 1990). For the Senate the limit is 2½ times the state voting age population (with a minimum of $20,000) plus COLA. In 1990, the range was from $50,280 (thirteen states) to $1,073,478 (California). In addition since 1980, state parties, which are subject to the same limitations on coordinated expenditures in congressional campaigns in their states, have been able to sign ‘agency agreements’ with the congressional committees, effectively allowing the latter to double their coordinated expenditures (FEC v. Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee et al.).

Also since 1980 parties have been able to make unlimited expenditures for ‘party building’ activities (voter registration and list development, get-out-the-vote letters or phone banks) in which the party advocates only itself rather than any particular candidate. As an extreme example of these ‘soft money’ activities the DCCC and DNC built a state-of-the-art communications centre which could be rented to candidates at bargain-basement prices without having to charge the capital costs against any candidate’s support limits. The party committees can also circumvent the limitations on direct contributions by ‘advising’ donors to give directly to a candidate’s campaign and by ‘bundling,’ receiving donations themselves and then channelling funds to the candidate. As a result of these differences the services provided by the House and Senate campaign committees also differ significantly. Because senatorial candidates are usually well-seasoned politicians able to hire their own consultants, they do not request or require much strategic service from the party committees. What they want is free money and that is what the senatorial committees are structured to give. With much lower contribution limits and often less experienced candidates, the House committees

specialise in providing advice and subsidised services. These services include low cost rental of mailing lists, assembly of direct mail fundraising letters and below market use of television and radio studios. They also provide candidate and spouse training, video coaching and opposition research.

PARTY CAMPAIGNING

A campaign can be divided into several functions: advance planning; candidate recruitment and selection; the amassing and allocation of resources; choice of issues to be emphasised and determination of positions on them; and, in the case of legislative elections, coordination of effort across constituencies. How, and how much, do American parties, especially as embodied in their three national committees, perform these functions?

Planning

Particularly since the mid-1970s the six party committees have been year round operations with permanent premises. Although the size of the staffs ebbs and flows with the electoral cycle, all six committees have core staff that begin campaigning for the next election often before the last election has taken place. With a fixed election cycle, plans can be laid years in advance. In 1990 the national committees of both parties, but especially the Republicans, devoted much of their effort to planning for the post-reapportionment, 1992 elections. The actual effectiveness of such planning is limited by a number of factors, however. First, of course, is the force of changing circumstances; the parties basically are unable to predict, let alone determine, which issues will be significant or which candidates will choose to run in any particular election. Second, the fragmented nature of American politics means both that there is unlikely to be any single strategy that would be uniformly effective and little press or public expectation that a party will have a uniform national strategy. Third, although all the committees have a core of permanent staff positions, turnover of staff members is extremely high with the inevitable effect on continuity of planning. Finally, one should remember that the fixed election cycle encourages advanced planning by all the participants in the electoral process including political commentators, potential candidates and the various firms and consultants within the campaign industry.
Recruitment

The NRCC and the DCCC both claim to be highly involved in candidate recruitment. Actually a more appropriate term for their activities would be candidate ‘prospecting’ as the committees have no means to assure nomination for a candidate. While party organizers may encourage a particular candidate to come forward, they cannot prevent others from challenging him or her in a primary election. The winner of the primary automatically becomes the party nominee. In many races, however, the problem is not selecting the best candidate, but dredging up a presentable candidate. If in the case of a contested nomination the party has little capacity to make its preferences stick, in this case it has very little discretion – beggars can’t be choosers. But the congressional campaign committees have also adopted a non-discouragement strategy when it comes to nominations. The NRCC has not endorsed candidates in primary elections unless the entire Republican delegation from the state, the entire NRCC and a substantial portion of state and local party officials agree. Even when the NRCC has encouraged a candidate to come forward, they offer services such as opposition research and generic primary strategies to challengers as well. The DCCC, although also claiming to be involved in candidate recruitment, is prohibited by its constitution from becoming involved in primaries, necessarily limiting its effectiveness in candidate recruitment.

The senatorial committees face a different scenario. Candidates normally present themselves without any need to be recruited. The DSICC, however, occasionally uses pre-primary polls that show a seat to be more winnable than originally thought in order to entice more attractive potential candidates. The DCCC stays neutral in primaries because, as their staff members explain, they want candidates who can withstand the electoral test, not necessarily those that look best on paper (Dunn interview). Similarly the NRSC avoids primary involvement. They see primary struggles as healthy testing grounds for revealing the weaknesses of the campaign organisations (Grotta interview). In 1990 the Republican National Committee, on the other hand, abandoned the traditional hands off policy to support the primary favourites of President Bush. In one particular case the RNC supported Robert Smith in the Republican senatorial primary in New Hampshire notwithstanding the protest of Republican state chairman, Rona Charbonneau (Broder, 1990).

Resource Allocation

The congressional party committees provide campaign money and services in pretty much the same manner. Allocation of resources to individual candidates is determined with regard to two competing sets of criteria. On one hand, support depends on the perceived marginality or ‘winnability’ of the contest. On the other hand, according to committee staff members, the fact that the congressional campaign committees are run by incumbents dictates an alternative set of priorities: incumbent maintenance first; open seats (especially those that were held previously by the party) second; and challengers third. The way this played out in the 1990 campaign is shown in Tables 10.1 and 10.2. Table 10.1 shows the magnitude of the party committees’ contributions to candidates’ campaigns broken down by chamber, party, incumbency status and outcome. In each case only support from the committee of the corresponding chamber has been included. Several significant differences are apparent. With the exception of Democratic challengers to safe Republican seats, Senate candidates nearly all receive party contributions near the legal maximum; the House committees cannot afford anything approaching such universal generosity and so must make choices. Within that constraint, the House Republicans tend towards a bimodal distribution with some candidates receiving close to the maximum at the cost of making only token (or no) contributions to many more; the Democrats tend to a flatter distribution with proportionately more small contributions. Both parties try to distinguish challengers and candidates in open seats who have a reasonable chance of winning (in particular those in open seats formerly held by the party) from those who do not and concentrate support on the former; none the less, this does not prevent them from contributing, in a few cases significantly, to the campaigns of incumbents facing no opposition at all.

Table 10.2 extends these comparisons by showing the average magnitude of direct contributions and coordinated expenditures broken down by chamber, party and incumbency status as well as the average net disbursements of the candidates’ full election cycle campaigns. In each case the average is figured over the number of candidates in the relevant category (that is the average party contribution is figured on the basis of the number of candidates who actually received a direct party contribution and so on). The Senate figures reveal little beyond what was shown in Table 10.1; basically, both
### Table 10.1 US party committee contributions by party, chamber, incumbency status, and outcome

#### House Democrats

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<th>Incumbent lost</th>
<th>Incumbent, no contest</th>
<th>Challenger won</th>
<th>Challenger lost</th>
<th>Republican open seat help by Republicans</th>
<th>Democrat open seat help by Democrats</th>
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#### Senate Republicans

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<th>Incumbent lost</th>
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<th>Challenger won</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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**Notes**

a. Party contributions are classified according to the following scheme:

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<th>Senate</th>
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* 20 per cent of legal maximum
* 80 per cent of legal maximum

$5001 – 20 per cent of legal maximum

over 87 per cent of legal maximum
parties give everything they are allowed to all their candidates. The House figures are more illuminating. Contrary to reports from committee staffers (Amend, Dunn, Grotta interviews), both parties on average make larger contributions to open-seat races, followed by contributions to challengers, with incumbents receiving the smallest average contributions. Despite efforts to target contributions to incumbents who were in trouble both parties missed some important races. As the ‘n’s show, not all candidates who receive party support receive both kinds of support. There is a significant tendency here for the House Democrats to receive support in the form of coordinated expenditures while Republicans are more likely to receive cash; moreover, when the Republicans make coordinated expenditures on behalf of a candidate they appear to be much larger than those made by the Democrats.

In assessing the utility of party committee contributions to individual candidates it is necessary to supplement the figures with a note of political realism. American campaigns are directed locally; cash to help pay the bills the candidate chooses to incur is always useful. Coordinated expenditures may take the form of agreement to pay those same bills, in which case they are equally useful, but they may take other forms as well. At the other extreme, the party committee may conduct a statewide poll and provide the results to candidates—consequently reporting the assessed value as a coordinated expenditure—even though the candidates have no interest in, or use for, the data. On the other hand, even when coordinated expenditures are of little use to the candidate they may be of great use to the party. A large number of relatively small coordinated expenditures can make a party seem very active in the great constellation of congressional races even if it has little or no impact in individual races. For the party committees the appearance of making extensive contributions may be more important than the reality. Finally, Table 10.2 shows that even in those cases in which the parties ‘max-out’ in their contributions to a candidate, total party support is still only a very small fraction of the cost of a competitive American congressional campaign.

### Campaign Issues

All the party committees offer advice and counsel regarding the selection of issues and issue positions. What is most striking about this advice, however, is that, although there is a nominal party line, candidates are rarely punished for deviating from it. Indeed should a
candidate's personal position differ from that of the party he will be given help in developing a strategy to promote his own, contrary, position. None of the committees would ever encourage a candidate to take a position (or to do anything else) that they did not believe to be in that candidate’s electoral interest. Said NRSC press secretary Wendy DeMocker, ‘We would never, ever tell any of our candidates where to stand on any issue, whether it be abortion, clean air or the flag’ (Schwartz, 1990). As for party loyalty another Republican official put the matter succinctly: ‘as long as they vote for Bob Michel for Speaker, that’s all I care about’ (Maddock interview).

In fact individual and local electoral advantage entirely outweigh considerations of party consistency. Nowhere is this better illustrated than by the one major ‘national issue’ of the 1990 election, the budget fiasco. In June, President Bush indicated that he would be willing to abandon his ‘no new taxes’ pledge in the interest of negotiating (with leaders from both parties in Congress) a responsible budget. Many congressional Republicans felt they had been left to face the voter’s wrath over the President’s abandonment of his 1988 ‘no new taxes’ pledge before an election in which he did not have to run. In response House Republican whip, Newt Gingrich, led a crusade against the President’s plan. What might have been a major issue dividing Republicans and Democrats instead divided the Republicans against themselves. As the controversy intensified a marginal Republican incumbent, Jim McCreary, had to face the voters in Louisiana’s potentially decisive primary. Two days before the Louisiana primary and the morning of the vote on the President’s budget, McCreary had still not made up his mind. Ed Rollins, co-chair of the NRCC, suggested that McCreary vote against the budget plan and reiterate his support for ‘no new taxes’. The NRCC worked with the campaign to create new advertisements that highlighted McCreary’s opposition to George Bush rather than his support for the President (Mattingly, 1990a). McCreary won the race with a comfortable 55 per cent of the vote. The NRCC decided to recommend the same strategy to other candidates in close races. Ed Rollins wrote a memo to this effect and circulated it among Republican House candidates. President Bush recoiled at this blatant internal party warfare and publicly demanded the resignation of Ed Rollins (Balz, 1990). Rollins did not resign and House Republicans continued to campaign against the budget when they thought it in their own electoral interest to do so. In fact to vote for the budget resolution represented a retreat from prior promises and substantial potential for making political enemies for members of both parties. As shown by Gary Jacobson’s analysis of members’ votes, ‘the greater their degree of electoral risk, the less likely they were to support deficit reduction legislation’ (Jacobson, 1990).

The major ‘issue that wasn’t’ in 1990 was the Persian Gulf. Within a week of the 2 August Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, President Bush had committed 200,000 American troops to the defence of Saudi Arabia, but this decision played no significant role in the 1990 elections. There were several reasons. First, neither the President nor the members of Congress wanted the Gulf to be an issue. As has become all too typical of American government, whenever possible announcement of controversial initiatives is postponed until the election is over; whenever possible Congress avoids situations in which members will have to take public stands on divisive issues. Within a week after the election the commitment was doubled, but Congress took no major votes on the question until January. Second, polls before the election showed lopsided support for the president’s action; no one wanted to appear to be a wimp or unpatriotic, especially in the absence of any casualties. More generally, congressional campaigns rarely involve foreign policy issues except when, as in the case of trade policy, direct links can be drawn to local interests.

Another issue which might have divided the parties but did not was the Savings and Loan Crisis. There was in fact little basis for making it a party issue. The crisis was brought about by the decisions of a recklessly deregulationist Republican president and a Democratic Congress irresponsibly willing to do favours for big campaign contributors; congressmen of both parties and in both chambers were implicated in accepting large contributions from, and doing political favours for, apparently guilty members of the Savings and Loan industry. For many members of Congress the S&L issue was significant, but as a question of personal ethics rather than public policy. Typically most of the incumbents who failed to win re-election were caught in some scandal.

Coordination

The question of campaign coordination can be addressed in two ways, coordination among constituencies and coordination between the various party committees. In neither sense is there much coordination in American campaigns. The party committees produce issue books articulating and defending party positions on a wide range of issues and candidates who have not previously taken a stand are encouraged
to adopt those of the party. This is analogous to the party whip's function in Congress and is little more effective. This reflects what might be call the 'Rhett Butler principle' – the party issue book provides a fall back position when the member doesn't give a damn. On the important issues (to them or their constituents) candidates form their own positions which may or may not agree with those in the issue book. Deviation from the party position almost never results in loss of party support. The committees also provide generic direct mail pieces that candidates can tailor to their own needs and lists of consultants that the committees have found to be congenial. In some cases – although not in 1990 – one or the other party has produced generic material for use by all candidates (who can raise the money and choose to spend it that way). Examples are the 1980 Republican 'Vote Republican – For a Change' and the 1982 Democratic 'It Isn’t Fair – It’s Republican' campaigns (Luntz, 1988, p. 134). None the less, the important decisions are made by the candidates and their own advisers locally.

Looking at coordination among the committees the Republicans seem (or seemed until the Rollins affair) to cooperate more than the Democrats. They share some fund-raising lists while the Democrats practise competitive fund-raising (Dunn interview). Ever since the congressional committees have been permitted to administer coordinated expenditures through 'agency agreements' there has been considerably less need for strategic planning between them and the national committees. With their own independent sources of funds, the congressional committees had no reason to seek financial assistance (and therefore agreement with their strategies) from the national committees. Furthermore, with thirty-six gubernatorial races taking place in 1990 the national committees had more than enough activity to focus on without having to edge into the realm of congressional campaigns. The basic pattern of 'coordination' is simply that each committee confines its activities to its own group of races and stays off the other committees' turf.

Relevance of Party Support

The role of the national parties in congressional campaigning must be assessed in the context of other resources available to candidates. We have already shown that although the financial support given to candidates by their parties appears substantial, when considered in isolation it actually represents only about 10 per cent of the total spent by the candidates. The parties also claim to offer a variety of other services and assistance to their candidates, but here too there is less than meets the eye. As Frank Luntz writes, 'political assistance from the national parties is usually the last resort for the desperate candidate' (Luntz, 1988, p. 46). Candidates who have a choice hire their own advisers on the private market. If actions speak louder than words then no more damning assessment of the value of party assistance can be found than the fact that former NRSC Chairman John Heinz preferred to use costly outside consultants rather than free "in-house" advisors in his re-election campaign. "He never used the services of the NRSC when he ran" (ibid., p. 140, quoting Republican media consultant, John Deardourff). On a more positive note, Paul Herrnson characterises the party committees as purveyors of transactional services or intermediaries between some candidates and the campaign industry, suggesting that even if independent contractors provide most of the actual services the parties are none the less important players in the overall campaign process (Herrnson, 1988).

Technology and the Campaign Industry

The United States leads the world in the development and application of high-tech tools for campaigning. Significantly, while the party committees may act as intermediaries between candidates and the vendors of these tools and in some cases may provide services directly to candidates, the market is dominated by private contractors. Indeed, while the House committees target a limited number of races (usually about fifty) for intensive investment, a candidate generally must establish a strong personal campaign as a prerequisite for party support. Although the party committees were instrumental both in developing many of the new techniques and in giving the leading private operatives their starts, the committees are no longer the directors of the campaign industry but merely one of its many components. The campaign industry itself has boomed in the last fifteen years. It has its own (non-partisan) trade association, the American Association of Political Consultants. According to industry publications, vendors specialise in the following: advertising agencies, computer services (including both rentals and specialised software), direct mail, fund-raising consultants, general consultants ('full service' agencies), issue/petition management, list brokers and compilers (for direct mail), media consultants, paraphernalia, polling/survey re-
search, print production, public relations, research/analysis, speech writing and telemarketing. Altogether there are hundreds of firms, most restricting their clientele to candidates of a single party, but with partisanship determined by the candidate, not by any party committee.

As private entrepreneurs these vendors have a quite different agenda from that of the party for whose candidates they work. An immediate concern is getting paid (Hampton, 1991). Second is building a reputation for effectiveness which can mean winning elections, but also includes doing better than initially expected and making accurate projections, even in defeat. Originally neither party nor ideology played much role in consultants' selection of clients. As the industry has matured many consultants have found that it is better for business to restrict their clientele to a single party and/or to a particular agenda (Luntz, 1988, pp. 50–1).

Novelty pays off in campaigning, but it wears off too. The campaign industry is searching constantly for existing technologies that can be adapted for their purposes. Prominent among the 'new' tools in 1990 were satellite links, CD-ROM and video mail. Confronted with the federal budget impasse, members of Congress were unable to campaign in their districts with the same intensity as their opponents. By using satellite links for local broadcasts to send material taped just a few hours before, or even for live debates, the incumbent can give the illusion of being in the district even while he is stuck in Washington. For example, Minnesota Republican Senator Rudy Boschwitz debated Democratic challenger Paul Wellstone from the National Press Club. Although these facilities are available on the private market the party organisations provide their candidates with studio facilities and satellite time at well below market rates. (For ostensibly 'substantive' rather than 'political' broadcasts incumbents can use even more heavily subsidised congressional facilities (Kenworthy, 1990).)

Another technological adaptation is the use of CD-ROM for voter contact activities. New firms have emerged specifically marketing compact discs listing names, addresses and turnout records of all registered voters in specified areas. Once the initial start-up cost is paid the campaign can generate sophisticated contact tools in-house. These include customised call sheets for 'phone banks; neighbourhood walking sheets that can be modified to accommodate changing needs; samples for quick polls; and groupings of voters by specific characteristics (Campney, 1991). One of the problems confronting House candidates in cities like New York and Los Angeles is that media advertising rates are based on the size of the full media market, only a fraction of which is in any particular district and therefore of interest to a particular candidate. Even where there is a better fit between media market and constituency boundaries, only an untargetable fraction are watching at any given time. At prices as low as $1.25 per copy, direct mail of VCR tapes was touted as the 'marketing tool of the next decade', allowing a longer message to be targeted to a specific audience (Purpuro, 1991).

RESULTS

The 1990 congressional election was the only one after the war in which 'the mean vote for incumbents of both parties fell' (Jacobson, 1990). Despite this apparent anti-incumbent bias only 15 of 406 Representatives and one of 35 Senators seeking re-election were defeated. Overall only one Senate seat changed hands (from Republican to Democrat) and only 19 House seats (with a net gain of 8 for the Democrats plus the election of the only Socialist congressman, at the expense of the Republicans). As shown in Table 10.3 the final line-up in the House was 267 Democrats, 167 Republicans and one Socialist who asked to join the Democratic caucus; in the Senate the net outcome was 56 Democrats to 44 Republicans. Although one cannot find the Democrats with a map in presidential politics they continue to have a stranglehold on Congress.

Jacobson suggests one reason why neither party was able to capitalise on anti-incumbent feelings in the electorate. By the time these had become apparent, the nominees had already been determined, if not formally then because strong potential challengers had already decided to wait until the new district lines were drawn for 1992. Another reason is the safety of most Congressional seats. With an average vote percentage of over 65 per cent in 1988 most incumbents could survive swings far larger than the 3.9 per cent that actually occurred. Moreover, it is easy to mistake hostility towards incumbents in general for opposition to particular incumbents. As Fenno observed many years ago not only do Americans who dislike Congress like their own congressmen, they like them for doing precisely those things that they dislike in the institution as a whole—supporting pork-barrel legislation (in this case 'vital federal projects' in their own districts) and protecting special interests (in this case their constituents themselves) (Fenno, 1975).
NRCC had supported them adequately in the election took this opportunity to oppose the NRCC chair. The truth of the matter is that congressional campaign committee chairmen tend to be blamed (as in this instance) or rewarded (as in the case of Senator George Mitchell who became majority leader as a result of his tenure as head of the DSCC during the 1986 election) for electoral outcomes that have very little to do with the efforts of the organisations which they oversaw. The Vander Jagt challenge also suggests that attempts to direct the efforts of the congressional committees more toward challengers and open seats will end and that a stronger incumbent protection mentality will prevail.

In sum little changed as a result of the 1990 election and the biggest likely change is a return to the status quo ante. The general security of incumbent members of Congress – barring being personally caught in a scandal – was underscored yet again, as was the degree to which congressional campaigning is basically organised, financed and controlled one race at a time. While the national party committees – and it is important to reiterate that divisions between the branches of government are reflected in divisions between these committees – may play an important role as facilitators, congressional campaigning remains essentially a local phenomenon.

Notes

1. In researching this chapter the following were interviewed: Deb Amend, assistant campaign director, NRCC; Anita Dunn, communications director, DSCC; John Grotta, director of voter programmes, NRSC; John Maddox, director of the campaign division; NRCC.
2. Prior registration in a party (in some cases as little as ten days) is a prerequisite for voting in its primary election in only twenty-six of the fifty states.
3. In fact in a growing minority of cases the only opposition is in the party primary. In these cases elections are nearly simultaneous contests (because states hold their primaries on different days) between groups of candidates who incidentally have the same party label.
4. In 1988 average party unity scores were 0.80 for Democrats and 0.74 for Republicans in the House of Representatives (0.78 and 0.68 respectively in the Senate). In 1989 the four corresponding figures were 0.81, 0.72, 0.78, and 0.78 (Congressional Quarterly, 1989, 35B).
5. At the extreme, each of the New Jersey congressional districts is only part of a broadcast media market that primarily serves another state.
6. The DCCC contributed a total of $499 to Senate campaigns; the DSCC contributed $15,000 to House campaigns ($10,000 in special elections); and the DNC contributed $46,150 to House campaigns ($25,900 to the delegate from the District of Columbia and the rest in special elections). The NRCC contributed $105,333 to Senate campaigns (nine of fifteen were former House members); the RNC contributed $255,778 to House campaigns (with an emphasis on special elections and races in which the Republican candidate was Black or female); the NRSC contributed $173,000 to House races.

7. Two defeated Democratic incumbents who received (virtually) no party support were Douglas Bosco (CA-1; $0) and Doug Walgren (PA-18, $555). On the Republican side Jack Buckner (MO-2) received only $369 from his party. These races also show that the parties are watching each other's opportunity lists; in none of these races did the successful challenger receive more than a 'small' (as defined in Table 10.1) contribution from his or her own party.

8. This is not unique to the party committees. Political action committees as well may pad their FEC reports in order to appear more important than they really are. The figures for party activity do not correspond to the much higher estimates made by staff members of the campaign committees. In part this reflects the difference between 'hard' (reportable) and 'soft' (party-building) money. The parties include 'soft' money in estimating the amount they 'spent in the last election cycle', even though it may have little to do with actually winning seats. Again party officials have every incentive to exaggerate their own effectiveness in raising funds.

9. In contrast to other states Louisiana's all-party primary election is really the first ballot of a two-ballot majority electoral system. A candidate who receives an absolute majority in the 'primary' is elected immediately, without running in the November election.

10. The federal government insures deposits in Savings and Loan Associations through the FSLIC. In response to the permissiveness of Reagan-era policies, a number of Savings and Loans made questionable investments and in the late 1980s began to fail in sufficiently large numbers as to deplete the FSLIC's reserves, requiring massive additional support from the government.

11. Conveniently for them none of the 'Keating Five' (senators) were up for re-election in 1990.

12. The exception that proves the rule is the 1990 senatorial candidacy of David Duke in Louisiana. Duke, a former grand wizard of the KKK, became a Republican simply by saying that he was one. He entered the first round of the senatorial election (see note 9) as a Republican notwithstanding the presence of a formally supported Republican candidate. Rather than risk another month of campaigning with Duke as their candidate, a number of prominent Republican office-holders endorsed the Democratic candidate for re-election and ultimately the party-endorsed Republican candidate was persuaded to withdraw. In the end the Democratic candidate was re-elected with 54.4% of the vote to Duke's 44.4%.

13. Since the 1974 campaign finance reform act it has become increasingly important that the individual Senators or Congressmen selected to chair one of the congressional committees have a relatively high profile so that they may aid the committee's fund-raising efforts.

14. Boschwitz thought that a debate from Washington would gain him credit as a 'workhorse' rather than a 'showhorse,' and counter Wellstone's 'Looking For Rudy' commercials. In fact the debate appears to have boosted Wellstone's ultimately successful campaign, indicating why most incumbents try to avoid debates with their lesser known opponents.

References


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