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## Strategic Politicians

V. O. Key felt it necessary to argue in his last book that “voters are not fools.”<sup>1</sup> Neither, we contend, are politicians. Their career plans and decisions are strategically adapted to the political environment. National political forces which politicians expect to have some impact on voters shape their election plans. As a result, the relative quality of a party’s candidates and the vitality of their campaigns—the things which have the strongest impact on individual voters—are not at all independent of national events and conditions. Rather, they are a direct function of them. This has important implications for understanding how aggregate national phenomena affect aggregate election outcomes. The crucial links, we will show, are provided by strategic politicians.

### THE OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE

Electoral politics in America is a competitive business. The demand for political offices is greater than the supply. Yet this oversupply of ambitious politicians does not make an election a free-for-all. Instead, competition for public office tends to be structured and orderly; candidates sort themselves out among the many offices in a predictable fashion. In some political systems the coordination of politicians and offices is performed centrally through strong party organizations that recruit candidates and direct careers. In the United States this coordination is a product of individual politicians behaving **strategically**—

that is, looking out for their own best interest-within a commonly perceived structure that offers advantages and incentives for political mobility.

The marketplace for political office is structured, but not overly so. The plethora of offices, peculiar to America, invites a large number of potential competitors, provides numerous opportunities for mobility, and raises some uncertainty about the prospects for success. Under these circumstances successful politicians must be acutely strategic in making career choices. How the structure of opportunities determines the targets and, more importantly, the timing of career moves has important implications for a theory that views the collective strategic behavior of politicians as an important determinant of election outcomes.

A central element of the structure of political opportunities is the stratification of offices. Only in the most poorly developed political system would one expect to find all institutional offices equally desirable (or, more accurately in such an instance, undesirable). Since the late nineteenth century, public offices in America have been ranked into a loose but widely acknowledged hierarchy with more attractive offices fewer in number and competition for them stiffer.<sup>2</sup> At the top of the heap is the presidency; next are seats in the Senate and governorships; below these are the somewhat more numerous seats in the House of Representatives; and at the bottom lie a multitude of state legislative and local offices. Some offices do not fit neatly into this sequence; consider the careers of recent New York City mayors. And from state to state the ranking of offices, especially at the lower rungs, will vary considerably, depending upon such factors as the size of the office's constituency, the number of offices available, and the office's value as a stepping-stone to higher offices. Nonetheless, the general pattern adequately describes the sequence of offices sought by most politicians across the nation.

In addition to stratifying offices, the opportunity structure guides the strategic behavior of politicians in a couple of other ways. First, it institutionalizes competition, making politicians

cautious risk-takers. The pyramidal distribution of offices eases the entry of men and women into public life but, as they attempt to move up the hierarchy, the steady attrition of offices creates competition and uncertainty for all politicians, including the incumbents. Second, the opportunity structure differentially allocates resources among offices within levels such that transitions from one status level of offices to the next is nonrandom. Certain officeholders are favored by virtue of their current position in seeking some target office. Over time, these advantages define highly visible career paths. The linkage of offices across levels reflects, to use Joseph Schlesinger's term, their "manifest" similarities.<sup>3</sup> For one thing, the structural isomorphism of national and state governments creates functionally similar offices throughout the hierarchy. From justice of the peace to the Supreme Court and from the state house to the U.S. Senate, offices at different levels are associated by similar tasks. This makes some officeholders at a lower level more plausible, hence advantaged, successors to a higher office than others.

The federal tiering of the office hierarchy also introduces a network of overlapping constituencies. Congressional districts, for example, generally subsume several state legislative districts and are in turn subsumed within the Senate's statewide constituency. With upward political mobility in America largely occurring through sequential capturing and expanding of constituencies, the politician's current office becomes an important vehicle for career advancement.

At first glance an opportunity structure that produces many more aspirants for Congress than there are seats available would appear to guarantee that there will always be well-qualified (politically experienced) candidates within each party trying to get the nomination.<sup>4</sup> If so, this would support the conventional assumption, noted in the preceding chapter, that the quality of candidates will be constant in the aggregate and therefore can be ignored in explaining the national congressional vote. Upon closer inspection, however, the opportunity structure yields two general conclusions which together deny the assumption of consistent candidate quality.

**First, we** note that because of dissimilar institutional resources even within ranks, some politicians make better candidates for a target office than others. This in itself is not a profound observation but it does lead to the second point. To the degree a politician's current office is a resource for advancement, it becomes a stake or risk in considering whether and when to attempt a move. Offices have investment value beyond whatever intrinsic rewards they provide their occupants. Even the politician who serves in an office solely to enhance his future mobility must plan carefully the timing of his move. The institutional advantages provided by the opportunity structure mean that running and losing, and in the process losing one's office base, not only interrupts a career, but well may end it.

### THE STRATEGIC CALCULUS

A base office as a resource inspires ambition but as a stake it urges caution. To appreciate better how politicians resolve their dilemma and how the decision to seek some higher office relates to partisan electoral conditions, consider Gordon Black's formal statement of the upwardly mobile politician's decision calculus:<sup>9</sup>

Equation 3.1

$$U_o = (PB) - R,$$

where

$U_o$  = utility of target office 0,

P = probability of winning election to Office 0,

B = value of Office 0,

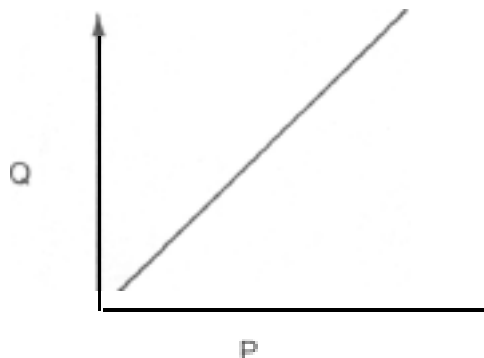
R = risk (e.g., cost of campaign, intrinsic value of base office, opportunity cost of losing base office).

According to this formulation, if the value of target Office 0 (B) discounted by the probability of victory (P) is greater than the cost of seeking the office (R), the utility of seeking the office ( $U_o$ ) is positive and the politician becomes a candidate.

In explaining variations in the quality of congressional candidacies over a series of elections the main message of this equation is that the more the politician risks, the greater must be the probability of winning before he or she becomes a candidate. Stakes vary widely among potential candidates, reflecting their position in the opportunity structure, and therefore so too will the electoral conditions necessary to trigger their candidacy. The political neophyte wishing to go straight to Congress risks little more than the personal cost of the campaign; even a low likelihood of success may not deter the attempt. The seasoned state senator whose district represents a large chunk of the congressional district, however, will await optimal political conditions before cashing in his investment.

The collective result of these individual calculations can be viewed as an equilibrium process, diagrammed in figure 3.1. Since the base office is both a stake and resource, the quality (Q) of a party's congressional challengers will be a function of its perceived probability (P) of winning the fall elections. And since Democratic and Republican electoral fortunes are inversely related to each other, short-term partisan forces will have opposite motivational impact on prospective Democratic and Republican candidates. The more extreme the electoral climate, the greater will be the divergence between the parties in the overall quality of their candidates.

FIGURE 3.1 The Quality of a Party's Congressional Challengers as a Function of Its Electoral Prospects



The discussion of individual voting decisions in chapter 2 implies that the better a party's candidates, the better its performance in the election. Given the relationship described in figure 3.1, the collective strategic choices of politicians to become candidates reinforce and augment the effects of the current political environment on the election. These decisions determine, in aggregate, the kinds of candidates and campaigns voters are offered in an election year. National events and conditions shape the expectations of potential candidates and their supporters about their party's electoral prospects. Their expectations affect their strategies and thus their behavior. And this, in turn, structures the choices voters are offered in districts across the nation. The election outcome becomes in part the aggregate consequence of many politicians individually making strategic decisions about their political careers. In this way, macroelectoral behavior can be derived directly from straightforward features of the opportunity structure.

### AN ALTERNATIVE COLLECTIVE STRATEGY

One need not look too hard at figure 3.1 to discover an alternative strategy for political parties facing an unfavorable political environment. If they were somehow able to reverse the relationship so that unfavorable conditions were greeted with high quality candidacies, they would minimize the effects of adverse political conditions upon the vote. The party's collective goal of minimizing the loss of congressional seats serves the interest of every loyal congressman, especially when the threatened losses would reduce his party to minority status.<sup>6</sup> As attractive as this alternative strategy may be for promoting the party's collective goals, it is nonetheless unavailable, for it requires individual politicians to behave in direct contradiction to their own self-interest. The provision of collective goods requires collective action. Strong political parties which centrally coordinate candidacies and campaigns by sanctioning *reluctants* and compensating victims of defeat may have such a strategy as an option.

But the weak American party system and the evolved opportunity structure guarantee that politicians will be entrepreneurs and that only the individually calculated relationship described in figure 3.1 will occur.

## CONGRESSIONAL INCUMBENTS

Although the net result of the aggregated individual strategic decisions should be to accentuate the relationship between the partisan political climate and election results, it is not obvious that all strategic decisions relating to congressional candidacies and campaigns must have this effect. With the strategic calculus in equation 3.1 describing the choice to leave one office and seek another, the discussion thus far best applies to **nonincumbent** congressional candidates. How well can this equation be adapted to depict the calculus of the incumbent congressman content with his position and ambitious only to protect it? Moreover, do incumbents' strategic responses to political conditions have the same multiplier effect on elections? We think that they do.

Every two years the incumbent congressman must decide whether to seek reelection (most do), to run for higher office, or to retire. Although this last choice is more often subject to non-strategic considerations, it can similarly be couched in strategic terms. A decision to stand for reelection rather than seek a Senate seat (PB) will generally reflect the unacceptable cost (R) involved in giving up **the** House seat **to** make the attempt. In considering whether to run for reelection or to retire, the risk term is greatly discounted since in both instances the "risk" involves losing the House seat. Understandably, most congressmen in any given year run for reelection. So many run so successfully that the incumbency effect has emerged in recent years as an overwhelming deterrent to quality challengers. After many years in Congress, however, each additional two-year term may grow marginally less attractive (B) and at some point when confronted with adverse political conditions (P) and a tough **cam-**

paigned (R) the senior congressman will “strategically” retire. Because incumbents have been winning reelection at an 85 percent clip or better since the late nineteenth century, retirement decisions should, of course, be relatively resistant to short-term partisan conditions. We show in chapter 5, however, that partisan retirement rates are in fact marginally associated with election year political conditions.

Threatened with the prospect of defeat, most incumbent congressmen who are not near retirement will redouble their campaign effort in order to minimize the effects of unfavorable political conditions. Ostensibly, such behavior contradicts our theory. The quality of the candidacies appears to improve the more severe the threat. But the redoubled efforts of incumbents drain resources from party candidates running for open seats or those challenging vulnerable opposition incumbents. Because these resources are far more effective when used in the campaigns of nonincumbents, this collective “circle-the-wagons” strategy becomes self-defeating. We shall return to this argument in the next chapter.

Suppliers of campaign resources also act strategically. Decisions about how much to give to whom are guided by perceptions of national conditions. Contributors’ strategies, like those of politicians, accentuate the advantages of the favored party. The financial connection is, in fact, so important to our theory that in the next chapter we provide a separate discussion of the strategic calculus and aggregate behavior of contributors.

## STRATEGIC POLITICIANS: READING TEA LEAVES

This account of political strategies is, we believe, intuitively compelling, but of course its validity depends on how well it coincides with the actual behavior of politicians. A variety of data suggests that politicians do think and act strategically, with consequences that match those predicted by our theory.

If, to begin, congressional elections are largely the product of strategic politicians making choices in anticipation of the



outcome, then we should expect to find current and prospective officeholders showing more than passing curiosity in signs about their party's electoral prospects. They do. Potential participants in congressional campaigns begin assessing the prevailing breezes well before the election-and before the final decisions about candidacy have to be made. There are plenty of possible indicators from which to choose.

Published speculation about what will happen in the fall is common in the first few months of an election year. Examples are easy to find. In 1946, the New York Times reported in January that Truman's troubles with reconversion legislation, which had put him at odds with important Democrats in Congress, had left "many Democrats ... dismayed over [its] effects in both 1946 (Congressional) and 1948 [presidential and Congressional] elections."<sup>8</sup> In February, the Times was reporting that the outlook for Republicans was the best in 13 years,<sup>9</sup> and by March, Republican leaders were claiming that "there was no question on the basis of nation-wide reports but that the party would carry the House this year and very likely the Senate."<sup>10</sup> Democrats were admitting privately that their chances were poor in light of public dissatisfaction with the administration's economic performance in readjusting the nation to a peacetime economy.

In 1958 it was the Republicans' turn to worry. The Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik in 1957, followed by a recession which deepened in the early months of 1958, heartened Democratic politicians. Their leaders exuded confidence, claiming as early as February that "in the November election at least half a dozen new Democratic seats would be gained in the Senate and a minimum of fifty in the House."<sup>11</sup> Democratic optimism was matched by Republican gloom. Early in February Newsweek reported the following exchange:

Rep. Gerald Ford of Michigan tried to find a hopeful note. Personally, said Ford, he doubted that the GOP's losses would be as serious as some of the others thought. "I'll bet you five dollars," responded Rep. Walter Norblad of Oregon, "that we lose at least 30 seats." Ford took the bet, but it

was all too clear from the faces of his colleagues that they thought he would lose it.<sup>12</sup>

In both instances, a poor economy and the administration's inability to deal with it effectively were the sources of partisan joy or depression. In other years, however, the president emerged as the central issue either as an asset or liability for his party. One year was 1962. The New York Times speculated in February that rather than the normal increase in congressional seats in the off year, the opposition Republican party faced the problem of "how to avoid being ground deeper into the minority this fall. ... [It] is confronted with a Democratic president whose personal popularity is at a record peak, who commands a near monopoly over the headlines and who has recently shown both zest and skill for putting the Republicans on the political spot."<sup>13</sup> "It looks too good too early," one wary Democrat observed in April.<sup>14</sup>

Another year in which the president's standing with the public was a central factor was of course 1974. The Times reported in February that "Republican leaders have begun to confront publicly a crucial question: how to win in 1974 and 1976 despite President Nixon's precipitous decline in popularity."<sup>15</sup> The Republicans question for 1974 quickly became how not to lose so badly, and their answer was principally to separate themselves from Nixon and emphasize their own integrity.<sup>16</sup>

Politicians and journalists rely on more than bare economic indicators and presidential popularity ratings. Other signs are available. In some years, the Gallup poll spoke directly to the issue of congressional elections by soliciting voting preferences early in the election year. At each election the reported polls are regularly cited as significant straws in the wind. Democratic successes in 1954, for example, were foreshadowed by a shift in the percentage of respondents favoring a Democratic congressional victory from 47 percent in July 1953 to 52 percent in February 1954.<sup>17</sup> In 1958 Democratic support rose from 53 percent in October 1957 to 56 percent in February 1958; this was, it was noticed, "the lowest point the [Republican] party has reached in popular favor since 1936."<sup>18</sup> And in 1974, Republican

depression deepened as the reported voting intentions showed their party once again in the worst shape since 1936.

A more concrete, and so perhaps more convincing, indicator of political tides is the occasional special election to fill vacant House seats. The Times reported Republicans in 1946 celebrating as a “straw in the wind” their capture in May of a district in Pennsylvania that had been held by a Democrat even though the Democratic candidate was the former incumbent’s widow and the party enjoyed a 7,000 voter advantage in registration.<sup>19</sup> A great deal of attention was given to the six special elections held early in 1974. All six seats had been won by Republicans in 1972 with between 52.1 and 73.9 percent of the vote; Democrats won five including Vice President Ford’s seat. “Rep. Phillip Burton (D. Calif.) asserted that if the pattern of the Michigan election held, there would be more than 100 Republicans who would not return to the House in January, 1975. House Speaker Carl Albert (D. Okla.) said the results ‘mean the Democrats are going to sweep the nation this year.’”<sup>20</sup>

Signs and portents are readily available, widely noted, and generally believed, and so inform strategic choices. Speculation about the party’s November prospects starts early. Polls, by-elections, economic news, and other, more intuitive, political soundings are combined to build expectations about the political future which serve to measure opportunity and risk and thus to guide career decisions and political strategies. Imperfect as any of these omens may be, they become, in the absence of better information, important to the strategies of candidates and their potential supporters.

## STRATEGIC RESPONSES: GOING WITH THE FLOW

Republican and Democratic responses to the exceptionally strong and decisively unidirectional spring indicators in 1974 provide the clearest examples of strategic behavior. Republican leaders found it nearly impossible in many districts to recruit good candidates to challenge Democratic incumbents, while

Democrats fielded an unusually formidable group of challengers. Republican National Chairman George Bush was in the embarrassing position of having to explain why, if he claimed to be optimistic despite Watergate, he had refused to run for governor of Texas in 1974. "As attractive as George is," a party official said, "guys are going to look at him and say, 'You weren't willing to run-what makes you think I should?'"<sup>21</sup> The chairman of the Republican party in Georgia reported that the "biggest problem was candidate recruitment. We couldn't get the enthusiasm built up. Our county chairmen would just sit on their hands."<sup>22</sup> He argued that Watergate led people to expect a bad Republican year and they refused to extend themselves in a losing cause.<sup>23</sup>

Republican troubles were taken as Democratic opportunities. Linda Fowler, who interviewed all of the New York House candidates in 1974, reported that "more than one Democrat in 1974 believed he could capitalize on the Watergate scandal .. and several echoed the sentiments expressed by this candidate: 'I chose this year because I thought I could win. .. With Watergate and the things — was saying, I thought this year would be a good time.'<sup>24</sup>

This anecdotal evidence is entirely consistent with the idea that the relative quality of the parties' candidates is a function of spring electoral prospects; the relationship posited in figure 3.1 seems to hold. Summary data on congressional candidates are even more persuasive. Our discussion of the opportunity structure suggests that the quality of candidates can be measured by their prior officeholding experience. The base office itself is an important resource. Intuitively, we assume that people who previously managed to get elected to public office at least once should be more effective campaigners than those who have not. They have some experience of (successful) campaigning and wider opportunities for developing skills, contacts, and insights. The evidence in table 3.1, although crude, is quite consistent with this assumption. In every election from 1972 through 1978, challengers who had held elective office did distinctly better on election day than did those who had not.<sup>25</sup>

TABLE 3.1 Average Vote Received by House Challengers, by Electoral Office Experience, 1972-1978 (in percentages)

Year	Democrats		Republicans	
	Prior Elective Office			
	yes	no	yes	no
1972	39.6	33.7	39.7	32.4
1974	45.9	41.6	37.1	27.6
1976	39.3	35.0	40.1	31.5
1978	39.8	32.2	43.9	32.4

By the standard of prior officeholding, Democrats clearly fielded an unusually large and Republicans an unusually small proportion of strong challengers in 1974. In table 3.2, the largest percentage of experienced Democratic challengers and the smallest percentage of experienced Republican challengers are found for the 1974 election. An additional figure, the percentage of experienced candidates divided by the percentage of seats held by their party in state legislatures at the time of the election, is also included. This adjusts the proportion of "good" candidates to the size of the available pool of such candidates (roughly measured by seats held in legislatures; no other clearly comparable data are published).<sup>26</sup> The need for this is apparent from the table. The proportion of experienced Republicans is relatively low in 1976 and 1978 even though no strong national tide seemed to be running against Republicans in these years. With this simple adjustment for the size of the pool of experienced Republicans, the difference between these two years and 1972 disappears.

More than 38 percent of the Democratic challengers but fewer than 13 percent of the Republican challengers in 1974 had ever held elective office. More than 39 percent of these Democrats, but only 7 percent of the Republicans, were in office at the time of the election. Clearly, assessments of the political climate had an important effect on career decisions at this level.

Notice that another strategic factor—one largely, but by no means entirely, local—also has a powerful influence on the

TABLE 3.2 Nonincumbent House Candidates with Experience in Elective Office, 1972-1978 [in percentages]

	Democrats		Republicans	
	%	pool ratio <sup>a</sup>	%	pool ratio <sup>a</sup>
Challengers				
1972	21.5	.36	21.7	.55
1974	38.3	.64	12.6	.31
1976	29.5	.43	16.9	.53
1978	25.4	.37	16.2	.51
Candidates for open seats				
1972	41.4	.68	51.7	1.30
1974	54.7	.91	49.1	1.22
1976	60.0	.88	59.0	1.84
1978	50.0	.73	44.2	1.39

<sup>a</sup>Ratio of the percentage of candidates who have held elective office to the percentage of seats won by their party in state legislatures two years earlier.

quality of House candidates. Experienced candidates are much more likely to be found in races for open seats, regardless of the election year. This was true even of Republicans in 1974. The explanation is obvious. Incumbency has such a crucial effect on the opportunity to move up to a House seat that its absence inspires good candidates to enter the contest regardless of other, perhaps less hopeful, signs. This is not an entirely local phenomenon because decisions by incumbents to retire, opening up the "open seats," are, as we shall see in chapter 5, also influenced by national political conditions.

Additional evidence that career decisions were influenced by national factors in 1974 is apparent at the level of competition for nominations in the primaries. Fowler reports that among Republicans she interviewed "the feeling that there would be a substantial backlash made it much easier for several candidates to obtain the nomination. In the districts where the incumbent retired, several candidates stated that they had not had to compete in a primary because 'this is going to be a bad

year for Republicans.' Others were asked to run because no one else would do it."<sup>27</sup>

The pattern of competition for nominations in 1974, compared to 1972, 1976, and 1978, indicates that the phenomenon was general. Table 3.3 lists, according to incumbency status, the percentage of Republican and Democratic House candidates who ran in primary elections in these four election years. Notice that, among challengers, the highest percentage of Democrats but the lowest percentage of Republicans had to win a primary to be nominated in 1974. Incumbents were affected less, though a larger percentage of Democrats than usual faced primary challenges in 1974.

As one would expect if politicians operate strategically, competition is much more common for nominations to contest open House seats, regardless of the election year. Primary competition is consistently higher among Democrats in all categories. Although it is tempting to argue that this is another bit of evidence for the strategic politician hypothesis (the dominant party's nominations are in greater demand) it may be more a consequence of intrinsic differences between the two parties. The Democratic party is much more diverse a coalition, especially now that the Republican party's liberal wing has practi-

TABLE 3.3. House Candidates with Contested Primary Elections 1972-1978 [in percentages]

Year and Party	Incumbents	Challengers	Open Seats
1972			
Democrats	39.0	46.1	70.5
Republicans	15.7	37.2	73.4
1974			
Democrats	42.1	66.7	91.1
Republicans	25.6	26.3	80.0
1976			
Democrats	40.8	57.0	95.7
Republicans	13.3	38.5	67.3
1978			
Democrats	39.4	44.3	98.1
Republicans	21.3	36.6	68.0

cally disappeared, and Democrats have historically been more intensely contentious than Republicans.

The principal conclusions reached in this chapter can be summarized briefly. Politicians do act strategically. Their career decisions are influenced by their assessment of a variable political environment. Their choices reflect, among other things, the conventional wisdom that national events and conditions affect individual voting behavior. National phenomena thought to be important are consistently monitored and noted; indicators abound. More and better candidates appear when signs are favorable; worse and fewer when they are unfavorable. Clearly, the choices presented to voters between a pair of particular candidates in the district are not at all independent of national conditions; indeed, they are a function of them. The implications of these facts for understanding the links between national events and individual voter behavior are unmistakable. We forgo spelling them out completely, however, until some evidence about other strategic political actors—those who supply funds for political campaigns—has been presented.