
Strategic *Politicians* in 1980

Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980 presidential election was not unanticipated, but few expected his margin of victory to be so large, and fewer still expected the Republicans to take over the Senate. Final preelection estimates projected a Republican gain of at least a few Senate seats, but not nearly so many as to overcome the Democrats' 59–41 lead. Republicans actually won 12 new seats, defeating 9 incumbents in the process, and they now enjoy a 53–47 advantage in the Senate. The Republicans also ran better than expected in the House, winning a net 33 new seats where only 10 to 15 had been projected.*

Thoroughly surprised, commentators looking for explanations immediately fell upon the *obvious*: Democratic congressional candidates were punished for the sins of the Carter administration and their shared responsibility for the twin evils of high inflation and high unemployment. Some even professed to see a thoroughgoing repudiation of all Democratic policies since the New Deal and even a major realignment of the electorate, though this was clearly a minority view. But the theory we have developed to understand how national forces affect individual congressional voters counsels skepticism. A more careful look at what happened in 1980, guided by the theory, is in order.

WHAT HAPPENED AND WHO WON?

A theory of strategic politicians suggests that we begin by asking which Republicans defeated Democratic incumbents. One *im-*

mediately obvious answer is Senate candidates; the discrepancy between House and Senate election results stands out clearly. We have thus far focused almost exclusively on House elections, for so does the body of work this book is meant to illuminate. But Senate elections can also be understood in terms of a theory of strategic politicians. They differ most obviously from House elections in being much more competitive; incumbent senators have usually had a distinctly more difficult time winning reelection, and they are more likely to have close contests when they do win. Aside from the clear structural differences between most House and Senate constituencies and other institutional differences,² the basic reason Senate elections are more competitive, and incumbent senators less secure, is that they attract a much larger proportion of experienced, attractive, and well-funded challengers.

During the 1970s, about two-thirds of nonincumbent Senate candidates [and challengers do not differ in this respect from candidates for open Senate seats) had previously held elective office, many of them in the House. Those who had not were often prominent in other ways: astronauts, millionaires, United Nations ambassadors, basketball stars. Strong candidates are attracted by the greater status and influence the Senate confers and by a reasonable chance of winning. Contributors are also attracted to Senate races, for many of the same considerations: more competition, the greater power of individual senators, the greater saliency of Senate campaigns. Consequently, even allowing for differences in constituencies, Senate challengers are typically much better funded than House challengers.³ Not surprisingly, surveys find voters to be more familiar with, more favorably disposed toward, and therefore more likely to vote for Senate than for House challengers.⁴

Differences between House and Senate elections were especially pronounced in 1980. Twelve of the 22 incumbent Democratic senators were defeated, three in primaries, while at the same time, only one of the seven Republican incumbents lost (to a fellow Republican in the primary). Not in recent memory had such a small share (45 percent) of Democratic in-

incumbents won reelection. On the House side the results were rather different. Twenty-seven Democratic incumbents were beaten (two of whom were incumbents in name only, having first won in spring by-elections], but they represent only 11 percent of those running. All but three of the Republican incumbents won in the general election, for a 98 percent success rate. Clearly, Republicans did quite well in both sets of elections, and Reagan's landslide must have helped. But why they performed so much better in Senate than in House races cannot easily be explained by presidential coattails or other national forces. The explanation lies, rather, in the strategic decisions of candidates and those who supported them.

Consider the nine successful Republican Senate challengers. Four were current members of the House and a fifth had been until two years earlier. Two more had held statewide office as attorney general. Another was a state party chairman. The only newcomer was blessed with enormous amounts of money as were, according to preliminary data, all but one or two of the others.⁵

Most of the ten incumbent Democrats who held onto their seats faced much less formidable opposition. One was unopposed, and five faced challengers who were written off early by their own party organizations.⁶ In the four races that can be compared with 1974, these Democrats actually increased their share of the vote by an average of 3.2 percentage points. The other four managed to win against substantial challenges with an average loss of 10.3 percentage points in their vote from 1974. Even in the Senate, then, the shift to the Republicans was not uniform, but rather depended heavily on the attractiveness of the challengers and the strength of their campaigns.

The same is true in the House, where, according to the preliminary evidence now available, Republicans mounted substantially fewer formidable challenges. No explanation of House elections relying on national forces is very helpful when we find that no fewer than 73 of the 185 Democratic House incumbents who faced Republican opposition in both 1978 and 1980 actually improved on their 1978 vote. The average gain for

Republican challengers between 1978 and 1980 amounted to only 2.4 percentage points. Republican incumbents did somewhat better, gaining an average of 4.2 percentage points over 1978; 86 of 115 improved their electoral performance in 1980. In both cases, the variance in the change between elections remained high, indicating that local considerations continue to play their predominant role.⁷

A closer look at the winning Republican challengers indicates that success was critically dependent on the quality of the candidates and the availability of campaign resources. The relationships reported in table 7.1 make it plain that the Republicans did not simply ride a favorable tide. The table gives the percentage of winning Republican challengers according to two variables: whether or not the seat was marginal and whether or not a strong candidate emerged as the challenger. Marginal seats are defined as those which the Democratic incumbent won in 1978 with less than 60 percent of the two-party vote. Strong candidacies are defined as those involving challengers who had

TABLE 7.1. Successful Republican Challengers, 1980 (in percentages)

Republican challenger	Democratic Incumbent		
	Marginal	Nonmarginal	Total
Strong candidacy	24.3 (37) ^a	46.2 (26)	33.3 (63)
Weak candidacy	3.8 (26)	2.5 (118)	2.8 (144)

SOURCES: Data on political experience: "The Outlook," C. Q. Weekly Report 8 (11 October 1980): 2986-3086; campaign finance data: Federal Election Commission, FEC Reports on Financial Activity 1979-1980, Interim Report No. 8: U.S. Senate and House Campaigns [Washington, D.C., October 1980].

NOTE: Marginal seats are those in which the Democratic incumbent won less than 60 percent of the two-party vote in 1978. Strong candidacies are those of challengers who have held elective office or who raised at least 576,000 by 12 September 1980. The table excludes the two challengers who defeated Democratic incumbents who had recently been elected in spring by-elections.

^aNumber of cases from which percentages were calculated.

previously won elective office or who were reported to have raised at least \$75,000 by mid-September, almost two months before the election.⁸

Clearly, the strength of the challenger's candidacy is the crucial variable. One-third of the strong candidacies were successful. Only 2.8 percent of the others unseated incumbents, and in two of the four cases involved, the incumbent was under indictment in the Abscam scandal.⁹ Marginal incumbents did attract more formidable challenges (59 percent, compared to 18 percent for nonmarginal incumbents); aggregate strategic rationality is again in evidence. But formidable challengers actually did better in nonmarginal districts.¹⁰

Even more strikingly, only one of the Republican challengers in marginal districts who was neither experienced nor managed to raise a substantial kitty early in the campaign was elected. And he was close to the cutoff point, with \$69,000 raised by September 12.

Not every strong Republican challenge succeeded, of course. The point is that almost every winning challenge involved a formidable individual campaign which might easily have been effective even without Reagan's victory or Carter's unpopularity. At the very least, successful Republican challengers put themselves in a position to take full advantage of whatever benefits the national campaign and other national forces might bestow, and this was a necessary condition of their success.

STRATEGIC DECISIONS IN 1980

The choices faced by voters in 1980 depended on the strategic decisions taken by congressional activists many months before the election. Our theory argues that these decisions are sensitive to the activists' readings of the political environment. What were the signs saying in 1980 and how did congressional activists react? Why did House and Senate strategies differ so much

in aggregate? The data are not yet available to answer all of these questions fully, but enough is certainly known to make a start.

The political omens, while clearly favorable for Republicans, were by no means unmixed. The economy was obviously in bad shape. Double-digit inflation persisted over the year preceding the election, peaking at 18 percent in March. The administration's efforts to reduce it by cooling the economy only served to increase unemployment. Inflation and the consequent high cost of living were the public's overwhelming choice as the "most important problem" during this period, and these no doubt contributed to dissatisfaction with the administration. Given the close association of the spring and fall economic conditions reported in the previous chapter, Republicans could well believe that the economy would return to haunt Democrats in the fall. But the signals were not entirely clear; Gallup reported a March 1980 poll in which, of those who mentioned a most important problem (with 74 percent specifying inflation/high cost of living), 32 percent thought the Democrats could do a better job, 28 percent thought the Republicans could, and the rest perceived no difference or expressed no opinion.¹¹

Attitudes toward President Carter and expectations about the fall presidential campaign generated even more uncertainty among Republicans. In the summer and early fall of 1979, it appeared that Carter was destined to be a one-term president. With the proportion of the American public approving his performance staying persistently below one-third, Carter was so vulnerable that Senator Edward Kennedy, an unwilling candidate in the past, decided to challenge his renomination. Throughout the summer and fall, Kennedy's task looked easy. Then the Iranians seized American hostages in Tehran and Carter's stock soared. In early December his job performance rating hit 61 percent approving and, with the addition of the Afghanistan invasion, it remained in that neighborhood throughout the critical period of strategic congressional election decisions. Polls which had shown Carter and Reagan running nearly even in September repeatedly reported Carter with leads of 25 to 29 points.¹² Finally, with Carter's resurgence it

became still less clear who would be either party's presidential nominee, and this added yet another dimension of uncertainty for potential candidates of both parties. Democrats may lament that Iran contributed to the nomination of the weaker Democratic presidential candidate and, ultimately, to the party's defeat; but Iran may also have limited the damage by holding down the number of strong Republican congressional challenges.

The aggregate indicators of candidate strategies do reveal some movement in the expected (pro-Republican) direction, but it is not nearly so striking as in 1974. Experienced Democrats were slightly more reluctant than usual to challenge Republican incumbents; 23.8 percent had previously been elected to public office, the lowest proportion since 1972 but not much lower than 1978 (see table 3.2). The Republican figure was 20.1 percent, the highest figure since 1972, but no indication of a dramatic **upsurge**.¹³ An unusually large proportion of Republican challengers—about half—had a primary contest for the nomination, suggesting that these nominations were more highly valued than usual (compare the Republican figures in table 3.3). About the same percentage of Democratic challengers had primary competition, a figure at the lower end of the scale for Democrats, but not the lowest in the series. The retiring **incumbent** Democrats outnumbered Republicans 14 to 2; meanwhile, six Republicans but only three Democrats were seeking higher **office**.¹⁴

Other congressional activists—political parties, political action committees, and other suppliers of campaign **resources**—reacted more decisively. The strategic behavior of these politicians is the most interesting and, for our theory, important aspect of the 1980 election. To an unprecedented degree, those pursuing collective benefits—partisan and ideological—participated in the normally individualistic world of congressional elections politics. While it is premature to parcel out credit for the election results, a close link between their strategies and Republican successes cannot be denied.

These activists are especially important for understanding

the Republican sweep of the Senate. Several sets of decisions converged to generate most of the successful challenges to incumbent Democratic senators. Conservative and single-issue political action committees selected targets from among the sitting Democrats well before the election year and even before it was known who the challengers would be. These groups identified senators they thought were vulnerable for being much more liberal than the voters in their states and they organized local campaigns against them quite independently of any expectations about the presidential election—though not without abiding faith in a long-term conservative trend nationwide. One such ideological group, the National Conservative Political Action Committee, invested in intensive media assaults on targeted Democratic incumbents to soften them up for whomever emerged as the Republican challenger. Others and the national-level Republican party committees joined in, once strong candidates had been recruited, helping to provide the extraordinarily large resource base enjoyed by these and several other promising Republicans.

By the summer, with the economy still doing poorly, with Carter by now well behind in the polls, and with the confidence generated by a harmonious convention, Republicans were following a classical offensive strategy, at least in their Senate campaigns. This is evident from table 7.2, which lists expenditures by national-level party committees for congressional candidates through September 30 (these are the most recent data available). The National Republican Senatorial Committee and the Republican National Committee were clearly favoring challengers and candidates for open seats. At the same time, and with only a small fraction of the money enjoyed by the national Republican committees, the Democrats were pursuing a defensive strategy, putting most of their money into the campaigns of incumbents.

Other preliminary evidence indicates that the more partisan political action committees also followed sharply divergent contribution strategies depending on whether they preferred Democrats or Republicans. Table 7.3 shows the distribution of

TABLE 7.9 Early Dollar Spending in the 1000 Congressional Elections

	Receipts	Expenditures	Incumbents	Challengers (in percentages)	Open Seats
Republicans					
National Republican Senatorial Committee	\$10,444,980	\$3,275,887	7.0	59.8	33.2
National Republican Congressional Committee	11,952,900	1,981,150	60.9	18.8	20.3
Republican National Committee	34,013,904	581,792	13.3	54.5	32.2
Democrats					
Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee	438,958	363,000	74.8	14.2	11.0
Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee	1,383,211	334,244	59.9	18.9	21.2
Democratic National Committee	6,015,352	374,174	56.8	20.9	22.3

SOURCE: FEC Reports filed from 1 January 1979 through 30 September 1980. The figures for the National Republican Congressional Committee include the period through 30 August 1980 only.

TABLE 7.3. Early Campaign Contributions of Selected Partisan Political Action Committees, 1980

Political Action Committee	Contributions	Share Given to:				
		Republicans	Democrats	Incumbents (in percentages)	Challengers	Open Seats
AFL-CIO COPE	\$ 748,920	3.4	96.6	57.1	23.5	19.4
United Auto Workers	1,359,676	1.4	98.6	67.1	17.5	15.4
Business-Industry PAC	129,620	90.2	9.8	24.2	52.7	23.1
Gun Owners of America PAC	122,526	92.8	7.2	9.2	67.1	23.7
National Conservative PAC	128,169	92.3	7.7	19.6	56.7	23.7

SOURCE: FEC Reports filed through 15 October 1980. Figures do not include independent expenditures.

campaign contributions by two strongly pro-Democratic and three strongly pro-Republican political action committees (PACs). The pro-Democratic groups favored incumbents; a spokesman for one of them admitted to a purely defensive strategy: "Our principal objective was to hold onto embattled senators and congressmen in marginal situations."¹⁵ The pro-Republican groups were just as plainly on the offensive: "We went after open seats and vulnerable incumbents."¹⁶

Conservative PACs and Republican party committees put most of their effort into Senate challenges. They did so for various reasons: because they believed that a number of the incumbent Democrats were individually vulnerable; because senators have more individual power to help or hinder the pursuit of policy goals; because Senate campaigns provide more publicity for their cause. Their converging expectations generated candidacies, resources, and campaigns that fulfilled, even surpassed, their rosier expectations. In some cases the outcomes were no doubt influenced by the presidential campaigns and other national forces—at the very least, a disproportionate number of Democrats stayed home on election day out of disaffection with the top of their ticket—but the essential ground was laid quite independently of the presidential campaigns or election-year circumstances.

House elections were treated rather differently. Here, too, Republican party committees sought out attractive candidates and supplied them with some money, information, and special training in how to run campaigns. And certain Democrats were targeted for defeat. But the overall effort was noticeably less extensive, and so were Republican successes. The National Republican Congressional Committee contributions reported in table 7.2 are indicative; most of the early money was given to incumbents. A larger portion was almost certainly contributed to Republican challengers later in the year as it became apparent which ones were mounting respectable campaigns. But most challengers classified as formidable by the standards in table 7.1 had to rely on other resources until then.

The exceptions are interesting. Republicans and ideologically congenial PACs had tried, with indifferent success, to undo the Watergate damage in 1976 by going after freshman Democrats who had taken Republican seats in 1974. In 1978 they went after open Democratic seats and did only marginally better. They tried a new tack in 1980, targeting Democratic leaders, committee chairmen, and others who were thought to be vulnerable because their duties in Washington precluded intensive cultivation of their districts and associated them with the national government's failures.

The strategy produced some notable victories; eight of the defeated Democratic incumbents had served 9 or more terms in the House; one was majority whip and five were committee chairmen. Some professed to see this as the result of a \$9 million media campaign telling voters to "Vote Republican. For A Change."¹⁷ But, as table 7.1 shows, victories were almost entirely confined to races where strong individual candidates and vigorous campaigns pursued the incumbents. These senior incumbents became vulnerable, it appears, because Republican activists decided that they were and acted accordingly. If our theory is valid, had potential Republican House candidates and contributors anticipated a Republican sweep in the fall, and had they acted on their expectations, Republican gains in the House would have been much greater than they were. The other side of the argument is that even without Reagan's surprisingly strong showing, they would have done well in the congressional elections.

To recapitulate: we do not deny that national forces—the state of the economy, public feelings about the presidential candidates—were at work in the 1980 congressional elections. But a careful look at what actually happened in these elections, so far as it is possible with preliminary information, reveals that the strategies pursued by politicians, in light of their expectations about the likely course of political events, were essential to the results. Individual candidacies once again hold the center stage; few Republican candidates who did not thoroughly pre-

pare the ground were swept into office. Indeed, it is not impossible that the results would have been about the same even if the Reagan campaign had faltered and Carter emerged the winner. The consequences of the 1980 election are sure to be profound; but their causes are not extraordinary.¹⁰