
Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections

Second Edition

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Congressional Elections: Some Puzzling Contradictions

The 1974 election was a disaster for the Republican party. Republicans suffered a net loss of 43 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, reducing their share to less than one third. The nationwide vote for Republican congressional candidates—41.1 percent—was the lowest for any party in this century. The party's misfortune was pervasive; state-level election returns were, if anything, worse. Prior to the election, Republicans held 41 percent of the seats in the state legislatures across the country; afterward, only 32 percent. The net result was that Democrats captured control of both state houses in 37 states, up from 28, while Republican-controlled states dropped from 16 to 4. The election left only 13 Republican governors.

The extraordinary election results befitted the events of that year. A slumping economy, the series of crimes and blunders lumped together under the generic term "Watergate," the collapse of the Nixon administration, and President Ford's September pardon of his disgraced predecessor were widely and understandably considered to be the main sources of the disaster. But despite the grand scale of both cause and effect, the 1974 election has remained a formidable puzzle to students of voting behavior, for, as we observe in the next chapter, surveys of voters turned up little evidence that attitudes toward Nixon, Watergate, or the economy had much influence on voters' preferences.

How could these highly salient and (for the Republican party) negative events fail to light up in voter surveys as "big" reasons for the election outcomes? The discrepancy between

general, entirely plausible explanations of election results and the reasons behind individual voters' choices was particularly striking in 1974, but it is by no means confined to that year. As we shall see, this puzzling contradiction is a general phenomenon, and it inspired us to rethink congressional elections.

A familiar tenet of political folk wisdom is that national events and conditions have an important effect on congressional and, to a lesser degree, state and local elections. Nationwide phenomena-recessions, unemployment, inflation, presidential triumphs or blunders, scandals, and popular or unpopular presidential candidates-are widely believed to have a direct impact on the electoral prospects of candidates for Congress. This common notion has been subjected to a good deal of scholarly investigation during the past decade. From this work has emerged an intriguing pattern of apparently inconsistent results comparable to the Watergate anomaly. Macrolevel studies of the association between national political conditions and electoral trends regularly uncover strong, robust relationships of the kind that conventional political wisdom would lead us to expect. But the various survey studies of voters have found individual representations of such phenomena to have an inconsistent, weak, indirect, or even no effect on the vote choice. Other considerations-most notably voters' assessments of the particular pair of candidates competing in the contest-appear to be vastly more important.

We propose in this book a theory of congressional voting and elections that reconciles these contradictory findings and solves the Watergate puzzle. The theory takes as its point of departure the important, though often underappreciated, fact that congressional elections involve candidates and campaigns. We argue that politically active elites-candidates and those who recruit and finance them-provide a crucial connecting link between national-level phenomena and individual voting decisions. National political conditions systematically shape elite decisions about running for office or contributing to campaigns. These decisions determine the alternatives presented to voters. Voters who must choose between two candidates will

favor attractive candidates who run well-financed campaigns. In this way, even those voters who are blissfully free of any concerns with national political issues may, in voting on the basis of bumper stickers and billboards, contribute to a national electoral swing by reflecting in their votes the advantages that accrue to the political party favored by national political conditions. The strategic decisions of politicians so structure the vote choice that electoral results are consonant with national-level forces even if individual voting decisions are not.

Some voters do, of course, express opinions on national issues or personal circumstances connected with national conditions in their votes and in their support of candidates. The microlevel relationships are, as we observe in chapter 2, not wholly barren. Moreover, such voters are most often found among the more active and articulate members of the electorate to whom politicians are especially attentive. For these reasons, the electoral effects of national conditions are not merely the self-fulfillment of prophecies that guide strategic elite decisions. The prophecies are, rather, self-reinforcing; the preferences of some voters merge with the behavior of politicians to produce interpretable election outcomes.

In defense of our theory we undertake a close examination of the behavior of different classes of politicians to demonstrate that choices regarding candidacy do indeed reflect the national political environment. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 explore the forward-looking strategic calculations of challengers, incumbents, and contributors—the core participants of congressional campaigns. That elites respond strategically to their spring expectations about the fall elections does not in itself demonstrate that their actions contribute to the election outcome. Anticipated responses may, after all, be merely advanced artifacts of the election. But the evidence we present describes such a pervasive and consistent system of strategic elite responses that, given survey evidence of the crucial importance of candidates and campaigns for individual voting choices, the inference that cumulative elite strategies must affect aggregate election returns at the margin is unavoidable.

At this level our case is too circumstantial to be fully persuasive, however; we need more direct evidence that our theory actually provides a fuller explanation of congressional elections. The second task, then, is to offer some direct tests of the theory against **macrolevel** theories that assume, explicitly or by implication, an electorate that responds rationally to individual-level analogs of national events and conditions. This is **begun** at the end of chapter 5, but the real face-off between these theories, which we label in shorthand “economic voting,” and our own comes in chapter 6.

In chapter 7 we examine the **1980** congressional elections from the perspective of our theory. As in **1974**, the dramatic numbers—a shift of **12** seats to **the** Republican side in the Senate, giving them a majority for the first time in a generation, and the Republican gain of **33** seats in the House, several at the expense of prominent senior Democrats—have quickly been interpreted as the repudiation of an administration and punishment for economic failures, or, more radically, as a sharp national move to the right and the beginnings of a basic realignment of the electorate. Our theory supports a rather different interpretation.

Chapter 8 explores some implications of the theory for the operation of a representative democracy.

The 1982 elections, coming a year after the original edition of this book was published, provided a unique opportunity to test our approach against the more conventional referendum models. In the epilogue, newly prepared for this edition, we use the theory to explain why Republican losses were much smaller than expected from the deep recession and low ratings of the administration.

The first necessity, however, is to document more thoroughly the serious discrepancy between the theories of voting underlying aggregate studies and the manifest behavior of individual voters; this is our purpose in chapter 2.