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THE RATIONALITY OF CANDIDATES WHO CHALLENGE INCUMBENTS
IN CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Making use of the numerous resources available to them, incumbent congressmen have come to enjoy very high rates of success in getting reelected. Typically, however, incumbents are challenged by relatively weak, unknown candidates, while potentially much stronger candidates are deterred. So why do these weak candidates engage in such apparently foolish behavior?

Previous research has suggested several answers to this question. It is commonly argued that weak, inexperienced candidates either misperceive the odds against them, or that they are actually using a congressional campaign to pursue nonpolitical goals or political goals other than winning office. Others point out that weak candidates may be induced to run by a low probability of victory because their political opportunity costs are low or because a stronger than expected showing may serve as an investment in future campaigns. This paper argues, however, that there is a much simpler and direct reason why weak candidates choose to run against incumbents, and that is that they do so so as to maximize their probability of being elected to Congress.

THE RATIONALITY OF CANDIDATES WHO CHALLENGE

INCUMBENTS IN CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

I. INTRODUCTION

Research on congressional elections has repeatedly documented a very curious phenomenon: the candidates who are most likely to run against incumbent congressmen are generally those who are least likely to win (Leuthold, 1968; Huckshorn and Spencer, 1971; Mann and Wolfinger, 1980; Jacobson, 1980a, 1980b; Jacobson and Kernell, 1981). Where potentially much stronger candidates are unnerved by the prospect of trying to unseat an entrenched incumbent, unknown and inexperienced challengers enter the fray, usually launching themselves, as Maisel (1982) puts it, from obscurity to oblivion. Why do these people engage in such apparently foolhardy behavior? The purpose of this paper is to argue that their behavior is rational in a simpler and more direct way than has previously been suggested. In presenting this argument it is probably best to begin with a quick overview of previous research in this area.

II. PREVIOUS RESEARCH: THE ADVANTAGES OF INCUMBENCY

During the last decade or so one of the most heavily tilled (if not over-tilled) fields of inquiry in political science has been congressional elections. The product of this work is a large and important body of knowledge about the nature of competition for these 435 positions. Above all, research in this area has documented the overwhelming importance of one variable—incumbency. Over the past few decades close to 95 percent of the incumbent congressmen seeking reelection have been successful. Moreover, as Mayhew (1974a) graphically demonstrated, their victories have become increasingly lopsided; by now "marginal" districts (conventionally defined as those in which the winner attained less than 55 percent of the vote) are clearly an endangered species.

Other studies, seeking to explain why this state of affairs has come to be, have identified the awesome array of resources that incumbents possess to employ against potential challengers. Many advantages inhere in the office itself. First, key institutional features of Congress allow them to maximize the political benefits and to minimize the political risks which public policymaking entails (Mayhew,1974b).[1] Chief among these features is the proliferation of committees. The existence of dozens of committees and well over a hundred subcommittees, each with a chairman, produces a specialization of policymaking expertise and disaggregation of power. This facilitates individual credit-claiming, which in turns boosts electoral prospects. As Mayhew put it, "Whatever else it may be, the quest for specialization in Congress is a quest for credit. Every member can aspire to occupy a part of at least one policy turf small enough so that he can claim personal responsibility for some of the things that happen on it" (p.95).

Similarly, the single-member district electoral system grants to each incumbent a corner on the local market for the goods known

variously as "bureaucratic unsticking services," "constituency service," or "case work" (Fiorina, 1977, 1979). Moreover, the incumbents' office allowances permit them to hire a large staff to assist in providing such services. The taxpayers also pick up the tab for the franking privilege, which can be used to drum up new business, supply baby books and other useful items, or to provide "political education" to constituents, e.g., what the congressman has done for them lately (Cover, 1978; Cover and Brumberg, 1982).

Thirdly, simply being an incumbent congressmen generally allows one relatively sure and easy access to the local mass media and thus a level of public exposure and public awareness (usually highly favorable) that nonincumbent candidates can only covet (Mann, 1978; Mann and Wolfinger, 1980). Incumbents also have a much easier time raising campaign funds. As Jacobson and Kernell (1981) point out, what contributors want in return for their money is influence, and most feel that funding a politician who is already in Congress is a much sounder investment than giving money to one who simply wants to be there. Indeed, incumbents can often be quite picky in deciding which contributions to solicit and accept, confident that they can raise whatever amount is needed to assure another victory.

As if this is not enough, certain features of the strategic environment in which potential congressional challengers operate play strongly to the incumbents' advantage. This environment is analyzed most thoroughly by Jacobson and Kernell (1981). First, these authors present evidence showing that the strongest nonincumbent candidates

for Congress typically are men and women who are currently in the state legislature or who hold a similarly important elective office (see Table 2:1 from their book, reproduced here).

TABLE 2.1

AVERAGE VOTE RECEIVED BY HOUSE CHALLENGERS WITH AND WITHOUT

ELECTORAL OFFICE EXPERIENCE, 1972-1978

Prior Elective Office:	Democrats		Republicans	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Average Percentage of Two-Party Vote Received				
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

That this is so is not surprising; such candidates are more likely to have some modicum of visibility in the district, more access to campaign contributions, and a larger cadre of volunteer workers and other supporters. But as Jacobson and Kernell point out, these strong potential candidates must, in general, forfeit their present office in order to run for Congress. Moreover, in the essentially Darwinian struggle for political office in this country, a defeat at the polls is extremely damaging, if not fatal, to someone at this stage of their political career.[2]

This being the case, this better class of candidates will be willing to give up their current office in order to challenge an incumbent only under very favorable circumstances. A disastrous year for the incumbent President will spawn a relatively large number of strong challenges against incumbent congressmen of the President's party.[3] Incumbents who choose to run despite having been touched by scandal or having performed a highly unpopular action, e.g., voting not to impeach Nixon, can also expect particularly experienced, well-funded opponents (Wright, 1977; Mann, 1978). In general, though, potentially strong challengers with high political opportunity costs will prefer to postpone their run for Congress until the incumbent, for one reason or another, e.g., retirement, ill health, a run at a Senate seat, decides not to run for reelection. A contest for an open seat, after all, usually promises to be a battle fought on roughly equal footing with an opponent similar to oneself in resources and experience. This is obviously a much more appealing prospect than giving up an office which was itself very hard to attain in return for a shot at unseating an entrenched incumbent.

In short, incumbents greatly benefit from the strategic environment of American electoral politics. Their strongest potential opponents will prefer to wait gracefully on the sidelines until the incumbents decide it is time to quit. The moral of this story, then, is pretty clear. Only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun, and only turkeys challenge incumbents.

III. WHY THE TURKEYS ARE RATIONAL

All in all, this account of contemporary congressional elections is quite compelling. There is no cause to quarrel with most of the major facts or explanations. There is, however, one aspect of it which is troubling, and that is that there is apparently no shortage of turkeys. Although incumbents are rarely defeated, it is also the case that they rarely are reelected without opposition. In 1978, for instance, only 43 of the 371 incumbents running for reelection ran unopposed in both their primary and general election contests. And, for the most part, it was the relatively weak candidates who challenged them; only 12.6 percent of these challengers were holding elective office at the time of the election, compared to 47.1 percent of the candidates running for open seats (Jacobson, 1980b). Only a little over 5 percent of them managed to upend the incumbent. So why do these weak challengers enter a contest they have so little chance of winning?

Previous research has generated a fairly large number of answers to this question. One oft-cited answer is that such challengers are irrational, or at least are not very bright; weak challengers taking on incumbents, it is claimed, delude themselves into wishfully thinking that their probability of winning is much higher than it actually is (Leuthold, 1968; Kazee, 1980; Maisel, 1982). Most analyses of these candidates' decisions to run, however, posit that they were fully aware that they would most probably lose but ran in order to pursue other goals. Some candidates who had

little chance of defeating their incumbent opponent claim to have run out of a sense of duty to their party; although they themselves had little chance of winning, they felt that they would aid the party's candidates for other offices who would otherwise be "pulled down" by the absence of a congressional candidate on the ballot (Kazee, 1980; Cavanagh, 1981). There are also those who report that they ran because a congressional campaign serves as an excellent forum to present deeply held views on major issues (Maisel, 1982). Others make the post hoc assertion that their unsuccessful run for office was a personally enriching and valuable experience (Kazee, 1980). Similarly, some challengers with slim prospects of winning might run because they believe the publicity of a congressional campaign will benefit their nonpolitical careers (Leuthold ,1968; Schlesinger, 1966; Huckshorn and Spencer, 1971).[4]

There are reasons cited, however, which derive from cost-benefit calculations which are strictly political in nature. One such explanation of challengers' behavior is that they view their campaign against the incumbent as an investment in a hopefully successful future campaign. By running a strong though unsuccessful race against the incumbent a challenger can hope to build up some name recognition and enhance his or her fund-raising capability (especially if the race was close enough to identify the incumbent as vulnerable and the district as marginal (Huckshorn and Spencer, 1971). Even better, a strong challenge may even persuade the incumbent that the office is not worth another costly fight which might end in an embarrassing

defeat, and that retirement is preferable. In this case the challenger will be in an excellent position to win the open seat. Indeed, a large number of those who have been elected to Congress in recent decades had made at least one unsuccessful attempt before succeeding (Fenno, 1978).

Similarly, Kernell and Jacobson (1981) point out that weak candidates have relatively low political opportunity costs, in that they need not cash in a presently held office in order to run. This is true, of course, and because of it such candidates can be induced to run by a considerably lower probability of winning. It is not, however, differences in opportunity costs which are responsible for the pattern of congressional competition which we are interested in explaining. Strong potential challengers who currently hold other elective offices face the same opportunity costs whether they run against an incumbent or wait for an open seat; the reason why they are inclined to wait for an open seat is that they want to maximize their probability of getting elected to Congress. And although it probably sounds surprising, it will be argued here that weak congressional challengers choose to run against incumbents for the very same reason, i.e., to maximize the probability of their being elected to Congress.

The key to understanding why this may be the case is to keep in mind the fact that in order to get to Congress candidates must do more than simply win the general election in their district. They must first defeat any and all other opponents from their own party in the primary election. For obscure candidates who have never

previously held an elected office, the product of these two probabilities (of winning the primary election and then winning the general election), may indeed be higher when the general election opponent is an incumbent congressman. The following simple example demonstrates a case in which this is so.

Assume that there is a congressional district in which the Republican incumbent is running for his fourth term. It is well-known in the district that he desires to serve one more term before making a run at a Senate seat which will open up in two years. In the Democratic ranks there are two potential challengers. The first is a popular state senator from a district which largely coincides with the congressional district. The second is a virtually unknown lawyer who has never campaigned for nor been elected to public office. Let us assume that the probability of the second Democrat defeating the incumbent is the average rate of success candidates running against incumbents have had over the past decade—6 percent—and that the much stronger first Democrat would have twice as good a chance, i.e., 12 percent. Let us also assume that having won the nomination the first, stronger candidate would have a 60 percent chance of winning an open seat in this district, while the second, weaker candidate would have a 40 percent chance of defeating a nonincumbent Republican opponent. Similarly, assume that the lawyer would have only a small, 10 percent probability of defeating the state senator in a Democratic primary, but that both would have a 100 percent probability of winning the primary if they ran unopposed. One other factor which the two

candidates must take into account is the fact that if they wait to run for the open seat and the other Democratic candidate does not, there is some chance that the other candidate will defeat the incumbent. We will assume that if this happens the candidate who waited will be precluded from running in the second election against the new incumbent of his own party. The probability of getting to Congress for a candidate following such a strategy is thus reduced by the probability of the other Democratic challenger defeating the incumbent in the first election.

The only assumptions about costs (opportunity or otherwise) that need to be made are that the respective costs each candidate faces are identical in both elections, and in any case are not high enough to rule out at least one attempt at Congress. However, it will be assumed that for both candidates a defeat would terminate their political career. Finally, it also needs to be assumed that neither candidate has a discount rate that is ridiculously high.

This situation, then, can be seen as a noncooperative, perfect information game between the two potential Democratic challengers. Each can make one of two moves: run now when the incumbent is running for reelection, or run next time for the open seat. This game is displayed below in Figure 1. The payoffs which are reported in each cell are the probabilities of the candidates achieving election to Congress, and are simply the products of the different probabilities of winning the primary, winning the general election, and, if the candidate waited to run for the open seat and the other

FIGURE 1

A GAME BETWEEN TWO CONGRESSIONAL CANDIDATES FROM THE SAME PARTY

WEAK
CHALLENGER

	RUN NOW VS. INCUMBENT	RUN NEXT TIME FOR OPEN SEAT
RUN NOW VS. INCUMBENT	10.8%,0.6%	12.0%,35.2%
RUN NEXT TIME FOR OPEN SEAT	56.4%,6.0%	54.0%,4.0%

STRONG
CHALLENGER (row labels at left)

did not, of the other candidate defeating the incumbent. As is customary, the first payoff reported in each cell is for the row player (the strong challenger), the second for the column player (the weak challenger).[5]

It is clear that the strong Democratic challenger has a dominant strategy—wait and run next time for the open seat. Regardless of what the weak challenger does, the strong challenger's probability of getting elected is much higher than if he were to run now. However, because of the small chance he would have of winning a primary, the best thing for the weak challenger to do is to run whenever the strong challenger is not running and thus sail through the primary unopposed. Obviously he would prefer the strong

challenger to run now and take on the incumbent, while he waited to run for the open seat. He knows, however, that the strong challenger is going to wait and run next time for the open seat regardless of what he does. The weak challenger will thus maximize his probability of getting to Congress by running now against the incumbent. To be sure, this probability is not very high (6 percent), but he is maximizing it.[6]

This game, of course, portrays a very simple strategic environment. There are, however, a number of other observations which can be made. First, there can be a fairly large number of strong potential challengers present before any of them would have an incentive to run against the incumbent. Say, for example, there were 3 potential candidates with the same general election prospects as the strong challenger here, i.e., a 12 percent chance of defeating the incumbent, a 60 percent chance of taking the open seat, and that each had a 30 percent chance of winning a primary in which they all participated. Each would still have a considerably higher probability of getting to Congress by waiting for the open seat than by challenging the incumbent. Similarly, the incumbent would have to be a great deal more vulnerable than the one in this example (who had a 12 percent chance of being beaten by a strong challenger) before a strong challenger would actually choose to run against him.

And despite its simplicity, this game does appear to capture pretty well the major features of the pattern of competition in congressional primary elections. Figures presented by Jacobson

(1980b) indicate that candidates running against incumbents are, as indicated earlier, far less likely to hold another elective office (and thus tend to be much weaker challengers). They are also considerably more likely to be unopposed in their primaries (see Table 1 from Jacobson, 1980b, reproduced here).

[TABLE 1 HERE]

One obvious and important way to expand this game would be to include another key player—the incumbent. For instance, if it appeared likely that the incumbent was going to run for reelection several more times before retiring or moving on, the strong potential challengers' incentives to wait for the seat to open up would decline. Ceteris paribus, such an incumbent might have a higher probability of facing a strong challenger. On the other hand, in such a case strong potential challengers may choose instead to run for governorships, state cabinet positions, or other offices. Whatever the case, this little game does suggest that incumbents could adopt an optimal strategy of announcing their retirement (e.g. after one more term, two more terms, or whatever) so as to minimize the probability of facing a strong challenger.

Another way to expand the game would be to enlarge the number of strategies available, especially for the weak challengers. It was assumed here that the weak challenger wanted to go immediately to Congress, and was merely deciding whether to run now or run later.

TABLE 1

A COMPARISON OF HOUSE CHALLENGERS AND CANDIDATES FOR OPEN SEATS

	Candidates Challenging Incumbents	Candidates for Open Seats
Percentage of Candidates With Primary Election Contests		
1972	46.3	74.2
1974	45.9	86.6
1976	43.7	75.0
1978	44.3	79.5
Percentage of Candidates Holding Elective Offfice At Time of the Election		
1972	16.3	33.0
1974	18.1	37.5
1976	12.5	42.1
1978	12.6	47.1

Another alternative, however, would be to attempt to climb the political ladder fewer rungs at a time (e.g., first city council, then the state house, then Congress). Doing this, he or she would have thus become a strong candidate for Congress, which is clearly better than being a weak candidate. The probability of getting to this point, however, would be the product of the probabilities of winning a series of lesser offices, and would also take longer. Moreover, there

may be important differences between politicians who pursue this sort of strategy and those who shoot directly for a high office such as congressman. The latter group might be less risk averse, or they might also be more ambitious; evidence presented by Rohde (1979) indicates that congressmen who first got to Congress by challenging and defeating an incumbent are more likely to try for a Senate seat.

IV. CONCLUSION

Previous research has suggested several reasons why weak candidates with little chance of winning run for Congress. It is commonly argued that such candidates either misperceive the odds against them, or that they are actually using a congressional campaign to pursue nonpolitical goals or political goals other than winning office. Others point out that weak candidates may be induced to run by a low probability of victory because their political opportunity costs are low or because a stronger than expected showing may serve as an investment in future campaigns.

It is almost surely the case that all of the above reasons contribute to the decisions of unknown, inexperienced candidates to run for Congress. This paper has argued, however, that there is a much simpler and direct reason why weak candidates choose to run against incumbents. Given the strategic environment which they face, challenging an incumbent may maximize the probability of their getting elected to Congress. This is because the current incumbent is not the only opponent potential challengers must take into account. To get to

Congress they must first defeat any and all other candidates of their own party. The likelihood of defeating an incumbent congressman is obviously very low, but a candidate who chooses to challenge an incumbent will likely avoid serious opposition in the primary. A candidate who instead waits for a seat to open up faces the additional hurdle of winning a primary against one or more strong candidates of his own party. For unknown, inexperienced candidates, the prospects of getting to Congress may be brighter in the former situation than in the latter.

FOOTNOTES

1. As Mayhew put it, "...if a group of planners sat down and tried to design a pair of American national assemblies with the goal of servicing members' electoral needs year in and year out, they would be hard pressed to improve on what exists" (p.81-82).

2. In contrast to this situation, a new, unproven candidate without prior experience in public office can often enhance his or her future electoral prospects by running a strong though unsuccessful race against an incumbent. More will be said about this point later on in this paper.

3. The major thesis of Jacobson and Kernell's book is that the strong positive correlation between the state of the national economy and the electoral fortunes of congressional candidates of the President's party results much less from the reaction of individual voters to the economy than from the anticipated reaction of congressional candidates and campaign contributors to the likely mood of the voters. The evidence they present does indicate that these anticipated reactions were important; Republican candidates in 1974, for example, clearly were less experienced and less well bankrolled than in other years, and this had to have a deleterious effect on their performance at the polls. As Jacobson and Kernell point out, however, it would be hard to believe that the self-fulfilling expectations of candidates and contributors are the whole story. If voters responded only to the relative quality of congressional candidates and their campaigns, experienced, well-financed Republican candidates would have done just as well in 1974 as in 1972, and Republican losses in 1974 would have been entirely self-inflicted. Presumably this would not happen very many times before politicians would discover this. For evidence indicating that voters do respond to the state of the economy (and thus that politicians' anticipated reactions are not irrational) see Fiorina (1981) and Kiewiet (1983).

4. A number of people have suspected that Maisel made his unsuccessful bid for Congress in order to write a book about it. Maisel, however, steadfastly denies this charge.

5. The following chart details the calculations of the probabilities reported in Figure 1. S refers to the strong challenger, W refers to the weak challenger. A is the probability of winning the primary, B is the probability of winning the general election, and C is the probability that the incumbent was not previously defeated by the other challenger.

Probability of S Getting Elected to Congress If:	A	B	C	A*B*C
S runs now, W runs now	.90	.12	1.00	.108
S runs now, W runs next time	1.00	.12	1.00	.120
S runs next time, W runs now	1.00	.60	.94	.564
S runs next time, W runs next time	.90	.60	1.00	.540

Probability of W Getting Elected to Congress If:				
W runs now, S runs now	.10	.06	1.00	.006
W runs now, S runs next time	1.00	.06	1.00	.060
W runs next time, S runs now	1.00	.40	.88	.352
W runs next time, S runs next time	.10	.40	1.00	.040

6. It should be noted that weak candidates pursuing such a strategy need not actually run against the incumbent. It is only required that potentially stronger challengers expect the incumbent to run for reelection and thus choose not to enter the primary. Due to death, serious illness, or other reasons, however, the incumbent may be forced to drop out unexpectedly after the primary filing dates have passed. In such a situation the weak challenger, having sailed through the primary, ends up running for an open seat. It may well be, furthermore, that the probability of such a situation occurring is comparable to the probability of actually defeating the incumbent. Whatever the case, though, the weak potential challenger still has an incentive to take on the incumbent and thereby avoid a primary.

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