At the outset of the election cycle, nobody expected the Texas Senate race to be competitive. In a state where presidential candidate Hillary Clinton garnered only 43 percent of the vote and no Democrat had won statewide office since 1994, Republican incumbent Sen. Ted Cruz would likely cruise to reelection. But Beto O’Rourke, a little-known, 45-year-old, three-term congressman from El Paso, made the race one to watch on election night. In fact, the 2018 Texas Senate race would turn out to be one of the most expensive in the country, with the two candidates spending more than $100 million.

O’Rourke waged a campaign that broke all the rules. In one of the most populous states in the country, he ran a person-to-person campaign focused on meeting voters individually. He visited every one of Texas’s 254 counties, even though a large majority of the state’s voters live in fewer than a dozen. As O’Rourke himself described it, he pursued “the least sophisticated strategy you’ve ever seen, literally just showing up everywhere all the time, and never discriminating based on party or any other difference.” Rather than running as a moderate in a conservative state, O’Rourke campaigned as an unapologetic progressive. He advocated for universal health care, a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, an assault weapons ban, abortion rights, and a higher minimum wage. O’Rourke received no help from the national Democratic party, and he disavowed PAC contributions. But relying upon grassroots support, he raised more than $70 million in small donations, nearly twice as much as his opponent.

O’Rourke’s unorthodox, rule-breaking campaign elicited a powerful response. His barnstorming attracted large and growing crowds over time. He built a national audience via social media. He livestreamed his campaign on Facebook—showing not just his speeches but himself doing his own laundry or skateboarding...
in a Whataburger parking lot. His campaign mushroomed to more than 1,000 paid staffers, along with tens of thousands of volunteers, housed in more than 700 “pop-up” offices across the state.\(^3\)

Excitement about O’Rourke’s campaign raised Democratic turnout in the 2018 midterms to levels not seen in any Texas midterm election in decades. The turnout in Texas in 2018 was even higher than that in the presidential election of 2000, when Texas governor George W. Bush won the White House. O’Rourke successfully boosted participation even among less politically engaged demographics, including young people and Latinos. The effects extended far beyond O’Rourke’s own race, as elevated Democratic turnout helped carry downticket Democratic candidates to victory in several close races.\(^4\)

Idiosyncratic in so many respects, the 2018 Texas Senate race underscores an important element of contemporary congressional elections. In an era when so few voters split their tickets, it is very difficult even for remarkably skilled, hard-working, and charismatic candidates to win against the partisan grain of their states and districts.\(^5\) O’Rourke’s persona and message turned what was projected to be a Cruz cakewalk into a barnburner. But even though O’Rourke’s campaign offered a compelling message and exciting candidacy, it was not enough to overcome the large imbalance in Texas partisanship. O’Rourke significantly outperformed expectations, falling only 215,000 votes short out of more than 8.3 million votes cast. But Cruz’s 2018 reelection attests to a political context in which party allegiances have become an increasingly powerful determinant of election outcomes.

**CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES**

Campaigns are volatile mixtures of personal contacts, fund-raising, speechmaking, advertising, and symbolic appeals. As acts of communication, campaigns are designed to convey messages to potential voters. The goal is to win over a plurality of those who cast ballots on election day.

**Asking the Right Questions**

Whether incumbents or challengers, candidates for Congress strive to map out a successful campaign strategy. To that end, each potential candidate must consider the following questions: What sort of constituency do I seek to represent? Are my name, face, and career familiar to voters? What resources—money, group support, and volunteers—can I attract? What leaders and groups are pivotal to a winning campaign? What issues are uppermost in potential voters’ minds? How can I reach those voters most effectively? When should my campaign begin, and how should it be paced? And, perhaps most importantly, what are my chances for victory? The answers to such questions define campaign strategy.
The constituency itself shapes a candidate’s campaign. In populous states, Senate aspirants must appeal to diverse economic and social groups scattered over wide areas and many media markets. In fast-growing states, even Senate incumbents must introduce themselves to new voters who have arrived since the last election. Only small-state Senate candidates are able to know their constituents as well as House candidates know theirs. But unlike states, House districts often fit within no natural geographic community, media market, or existing political division. In such situations, candidates must find the most suitable forums, media outlets, and organizations to reach voters who may have little in common other than being enclosed within the same district boundaries.

Because incumbents are typically hard to defeat, the incumbent’s decision to seek reelection colors the entire electoral undertaking. The partisan leanings of the electorate are also critical. The dominant party’s candidates stress party loyalty, underscore long-standing partisan values, and sponsor get-out-the-vote (GOTV) drives. Minority party campaigns highlight personalities, downplay partisan differences, and exploit factional splits within the majority party, perhaps by invoking wedge issues designed to pry voters away from their usual party home. As voters’ partisan attachments have hardened amid rising polarization, it has become increasingly difficult for candidates to win over enough “defectors” to triumph in a district that tilts toward the other party.

Finally, the perceptions and attitudes of voters must be reflected in campaign planning. Through surveys, focus groups, or old-fashioned informal pulse taking, strategists take account of what is on voters’ minds and what, if anything, they know or think about the candidate. Well-known candidates try to capitalize on their visibility; lesser-known ones run ads that repeat their names over and over again. Candidates with a reputation for openness and geniality highlight those qualities in ads. Those who are more introverted (yes, there are such politicians) stress experience and competence. Candidates who are young emphasize their vigor, energy, and new ideas. Candidates who have made tough, unpopular decisions tout themselves as courageous leaders. In the wake of scandals, honesty and openness are on display.

Choosing the Message

The average citizen is barraged with media messages of all kinds—an hour of television commercials per day, among other things. The candidate’s overarching challenge is to project an image through this cacophony of media appeals, including those from other candidates. “The only way to cut through this communication clutter,” a political marketing executive points out, “is to adopt the strategy proven effective by successful businesses. Create a brand. And manage the message with discipline and impact.” In other words, forge a message that will stand out from all of the competing messages in the media marketplace.

A candidate’s message is usually distilled into a single theme or slogan that is repeated on radio, TV, billboards, websites, and in campaign literature. “A good
message . . . is a credible statement that can be summed up in a few sentences and frequently ends with a kicker slogan. Strategists use these messages to frame the campaign: to set the election’s agenda—not by changing people’s attitudes but by shifting their attention to issues that favor their candidate or diminish the opponent. “There’s only three or four plots,” explained Carter Eskew, a Democratic consultant. “Plots for incumbents are Representative X is different from the rest; X can deliver; X stands with you. And the perennial plot for challengers is (fill in the blank) years are long enough; it’s time for a change.” As challengers seek lines of attack, officeholders often find that incumbency has its liabilities. An extensive public record gives enterprising opponents many potential openings to exploit. Past votes or positions may be highlighted to discredit the officeholder, sometimes fairly and sometimes unfairly. Incumbents may be shackled to unpopular positions or figures, such as an unpopular health care bill, a controversial tax bill, and unpopular presidents or party leaders. Sometimes, incumbents become complacent and take voters’ support for granted, a major political mistake. One campaign consultant summed up the lesson of such races: “You have to earn that support every two years. A lot of members of Congress forget how to run.”

CAMPAIGN RESOURCES

Even the best campaign strategy will fail if the candidate cannot muster the resources necessary to implement it. The chief resources in congressional elections are money and organization.

“Money is the mother’s milk of politics,” declared California’s legendary assembly speaker Jess Unruh. Money is not everything in politics, but many candidates falter for lack of it, and nearly all expend valuable time and energy struggling to get it. Every candidate, writes Paul S. Herrnson, wages not one but two campaigns: a campaign for resources (the so-called money primary) that precedes and underwrites the more visible campaign for votes. Campaigns in the United States are very costly. In the 2017–2018 electoral cycle, congressional candidates raised $1.7 billion and spent most of it. The average Senate race cost nearly $9 million for each of the two major-party nominees. The average House contest cost $1.9 million per major-party nominee. When modern recordkeeping began some forty years ago, House candidates spent one-sixth as much. Even controlling for inflation, expenditures for congressional campaigns have sextupled over the last forty years.

No mystery surrounds these skyrocketing costs. Stronger competition for majority control of Congress, population growth, and new campaign technologies—electronic media, polling, and consultants of all kinds—account for much of the increase. To be sure, old-fashioned campaigns based on armies of volunteers canvassing door-to-door can be effective in some contests. But candidates raise as much money as they can for good reason.
Fund-raising consumes tremendous amounts of time. In January 2013, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) gave a presentation for incoming freshmen about the time they should expect to dedicate to raising money. Figure 4-1 displays a slide from the PowerPoint presentation these new members received. The DCCC prescribed a ten-hour day for members while they are in Washington, DC. Out of each day, four hours should be spent on “call time” and another hour set aside for “strategic outreach,” which includes fund-raising as well as media relations. By comparison, three to four hours are set aside for doing the regular work of Congress, including hearings, votes, and meetings with constituents. A subsequent slide specified that members should expect to devote three hours for fund-raising out of every eight-hour workday while they are in their districts during congressional recesses.

In a 2016 interview with on CBS’s 60 Minutes, then-Rep. David Jolly, R-Fla., related what a party leader told him when he came to Congress after a March 2014 special election: “We sat behind closed doors at one of the party headquarter back rooms in front of a white board where the equation was drawn out. You have six months until the election. Break that down to having to raise $2 million in the next six months. And your job, new member of Congress, is to raise $18,000 a day. Your first responsibility is to make sure you hit $18,000 a day.” To be sure, fund-raising practices vary. Members from safe districts feel less fundraising pressure than members representing swing seats. Some members raise less money than their party leaders and party campaign committees ask from them. There is no question, however, that fund-raising puts intense year-round pressure on members’ daily schedules.

**FIGURE 4-1** The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee’s Recommended Daily Schedule for New Members, 2013

- ☑ 4 hours Call Time
- ☑ 1–2 hours Constituent Visits
- ☑ 2 hours Committee/Floor
- ☑ 1 hour Strategic Outreach
  - Breakfasts, Meet & Greets, Press
- ☑ 1 hour Recharge Time

Campaign Finance Regulations

The regulation of campaign finance in the United States is a dauntingly complicated subject. Congress’s regulatory efforts have led to a proliferation of entities, many with the sole purpose of raising and spending money in political campaigns, each with its own rules and regulations. In addition, campaign finance law in the United States has been greatly complicated by a variety of Supreme Court rulings. In the landmark case of Buckley v. Valeo (1976),16 the Supreme Court held that campaign contributions and spending are free speech protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution. The Court ruled that Congress may legitimately regulate campaign contributions—to prevent corruption or the appearance of corruption. But the Court held that most campaign spending could not be regulated. Subsequent Supreme Court cases have also had far-reaching effects on the state of the law in this area.

We must distinguish between (1) the rules governing how candidates can raise money for their own campaigns and (2) the rules governing the electioneering activities of organized entities not controlled by candidates. So-called outside money—campaign expenditures made by party committees and other organized groups not under candidates’ control—has become a much more important feature of campaign financing.

Candidates’ Campaigns

Congressional candidates may raise funds from four sources: individual contributors, political action committees (PACs), party committees, and themselves and their families. More than half of the money raised by House and Senate candidates comes from individuals. In the 2017–2018 election cycle, congressional candidates (or their campaign committees) could receive up to $2,700 from each individual contributor for each election (primary, general, or runoff). Individual contributions of more than $200 must identify the contributor’s name and employer—information reported to the Federal Election Commission (FEC), the federal agency charged with regulating campaign finance. Although there are caps on the amount of money federal candidates can raise from a single individual, there is no limit to the total amount an individual can contribute across all federal races.17

PACs may also contribute directly to congressional candidates. Under current regulations, multicandidate PACs are defined as those registered for more than six months, having fifty or more contributors, and making contributions to five or more candidates for federal office. In the 2017–2018 election cycle, multicandidate PACs could contribute up to $5,000 to a congressional candidate (or the candidate’s campaign committee) for each election. For PACs not meeting the definition of multicandidate PACs, contributions to congressional candidates were capped at $2,700 per election. In the 2017–2018 election cycle, PAC contributions topped $505 million. Although they have declined in importance, PACs remain key players in House races: They accounted for a quarter of
House candidates’ campaign receipts in 2017–18 and about 10 percent for Senate candidates.

In the 2017–2018 election cycle, party committees—national, state, congressional, and local—could contribute up to $5,000 per election to congressional candidates. As these amounts make clear, party funds cannot begin to cover the costs of today’s campaigns. Party organizations of all types account for a relatively small portion of individual candidates’ direct funding, even though in recent years, they have greatly increased their efforts and fund-raising capacities. Parties may also use additional funds to pay for services requested by a candidate, such as polling, advertisements, and media time. But these coordinated expenditures are also subject to limits set by the FEC.

Another source of campaign money for congressional candidates is the candidate’s own funds. Candidates and their families may spend as much of their own money in a campaign as they wish. Candidates who self-fund their races do not have a good track record of success, however. As one particularly stark example, businessman Bob Hugin spent more than $27 million of his own money in a losing challenge to Sen. Bob Menendez, D-N.J., in 2018.

Independent Expenditures

Rather than contribute to candidates’ campaigns, parties and organized groups also try to sway election outcomes via independent efforts in campaigns that are formally unconnected to candidates’ own efforts. Such groups develop messages, run media ads, and support get-out-the-vote drives. These independent expenditures are not subject to any limits.

A wide array of new organized groups operating outside the control of federal candidates have emerged in the wake of two 2010 court rulings, *Citizens United v. FEC* and *Speechnow.org v. Federal Election Commission*. Exploiting the opportunities opened up by these cases, hundreds of new, big-spending organizations known as *super PACs* have been formed. Super PACs are defined by the FEC as “non-connected political action committees.” Such PACs cannot contribute directly to federal candidates’ campaigns and cannot spend money in coordination with their campaigns. But they are permitted to make unlimited expenditures to influence the outcome of elections. Before 2010, corporations, nonprofits, and labor unions could not spend funds out of their general treasuries for pro-candidate advertisements. In *Citizens United*, the Supreme Court struck down that limitation as a form of censorship of protected political speech.

The Court expected, however, that such independent expenditures would be subject to the disclaimer and disclosure requirements imposed by existing campaign finance law. In the Court’s opinion, Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote, “With the advent of the Internet, prompt disclosure of expenditures can provide shareholders and citizens with the information needed to hold corporations and elected officials accountable.” Campaign finance law, however, does not provide for the information that Justice Kennedy assumed would be available. Under the current FEC interpretation, a contribution of $1,000 or more to a group making
an electioneering communication—that is, a pro-candidate advertisement in close proximity to an election—is reportable only if the contributor designated it to be used for a particular electioneering communication. In other words, a contributor may avoid disclosure merely by not directing the contribution toward any particular advertisement.

Certain types of groups, moreover, are wholly exempted from disclosure laws. Groups organized under section 501(c)(4) of the Internal Revenue Code have become much more important players in campaign finance in recent years, in part simply because of their exemption from disclosure requirements. For example, the National Rifle Association Legislative Action Fund, organized as a 501(c)(4) and thus not required to disclose its funders, spent more than $9 million on 2018 elections. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which is organized as a 501(c)(6), does not identify its donors, even though it spent $13 million in 2017–2018. In the 2017–2018 cycle, a total of $151.6 million in outside money was spent with no disclosure of the donors, and another $450 million was subject to only partial disclosure, together constituting more than the total $553.7 million contributed under full disclosure requirements.

The upshot of these developments is that the fund-raising efforts of outside groups are far less stringently regulated than those of both candidates and political parties. As a consequence, expenditures by outside groups have surged. As of May 2018, political advertising by nondisclosing outside groups had swelled by nearly 90 percent compared to the same period in the preceding midterm election.

Unlike contributions to super PACs, contributions to the parties are subject to caps, though higher ones than permitted as direct contributions to the candidates themselves. In the 2017–2018 election cycle, the national parties’ entities, including the House and Senate campaign committees, spent more than $1.4 billion, accounting for more than a quarter of all campaign spending. The vast majority of this money was spent as independent expenditures in targeted races. This is an impressive figure, considering that the parties face an array of contribution limits that don’t apply to outside groups.

The combined effect of independent spending by outside groups and parties is that “candidates are no longer directly in control of financing of their campaigns.” Individual candidates accounted for just slightly over half of campaign spending in the 2018 cycle. Outside spending is especially important in the most expensive, hotly contested races: For example, independent expenditures accounted for $90 million of the $114 million spent in the 2018 Florida Senate race in which Republican challenger Rick Scott defeated Democratic incumbent Bill Nelson.

As one former FEC commissioner put it, then, “the money’s flowing.” When the last major campaign finance reform law was enacted in 2002, skeptics argued that the new law would do little to halt the overall flow of money into political campaigns. “This law will not remove one dime from politics,” predicted Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., the measure’s leading GOP foe. McConnell’s skepticism has
certainly been borne out, both by innovations in campaign finance and by Supreme Court rulings limiting the scope of regulatory restrictions. In the end, campaign finance laws have failed to limit the influence of money in politics. Big money is alive and well in U.S. elections, and it increasingly flows through organized groups and party channels that operate independently of individual candidates.

**Incumbents Versus Challengers**

Although incumbents need less money than do challengers, they receive more—a double-barreled financial advantage (see Figure 4-2). Incumbents are both better known than challengers and enjoy government-subsidized ways of reaching constituents. Nevertheless, incumbents are able to raise substantially more money. In 2018, House incumbents raised $1.9 million, on average, to defend their seats—more than four times what their challengers could muster. Senate incumbents raised an average of $15.5 million in 2018, outpacing their general-election foes more than seven to one.33

Challengers’ first hurdle is to raise enough money to make their names and faces known to voters. Because most of them start from a low baseline of name recognition, their campaign dollars tend to be more cost-effective than those of incumbents. Nevertheless, they must raise a great deal of money to defeat an incumbent. As Gary C. Jacobson and Jamie L. Carson point out, “The minimum price tag for a competitive House campaign under average conditions today is probably more than $800,000; 150 of the 160 challengers who defeated incumbents from 1996 through 2014 spent more than that amount.”34

Incumbents of both parties are able to raise money far more easily than challengers because contributors see them as better investments. Many donors to congressional campaigns seek to cultivate closer relationships with people in positions of power. Donors know that incumbents usually win reelection, so they do not usually waste their money on challengers, even when those challengers might be more appealing in their policy stances or party affiliation. Indeed, “access-oriented” giving follows the shifts in party control of Congress, as donors curry favor with committee chairs and other leaders regardless of party.35 Challengers obviously cannot attract this type of campaign donation, which gives incumbents a substantial fund-raising advantage.36

Challengers have a difficult time convincing donors that they have any reasonable chance of winning. In this arena, as in so many others, nothing succeeds like success. “Failure to raise enough money creates a vicious spiral,” explains political analyst Thomas B. Edsall. “Some donors become reluctant to invest their cash, and then state and national parties are less likely to target . . . party building and get out the vote drives in those races.”37

When challengers are successful in raising money, they typically find that the funds make a significant difference in their electoral chances. Generally speaking, the more challengers spend, the more votes they are likely to attract.38 The same is not true of incumbents. In fact, for incumbents, there is actually
FIGURE 4-2  Average Campaign Expenditures for Incumbents, Challengers, and Open-Seat Candidates: House and Senate, 1974–2016

a negative correlation between campaign expenditures and electoral success. Vulnerable incumbents tend to speed up their fund-raising. As Jacobson points out, “Incumbents can raise whatever they think they need.” Endangered incumbents thus raise prodigious sums as they seek to hold onto their seats. Meanwhile, safe incumbents—especially senior members who infrequently face significant electoral challenges—spend much less. Despite the negative correlation between campaign spending and electoral security, incumbents are unquestionably better off with more campaign money than less. But compared with challengers, incumbents’ success or failure is much less tied to their fund-raising totals.

Many incumbents raise and spend far more than is necessary. Incumbents’ overspending is frequently motivated by a sense of uncertainty and risk. “Because of uncertainty,” Jacobson explains, “members tend to exaggerate electoral threats and overreact to them. They are inspired by worst-case scenarios—what would they have to do to win if everything went wrong?—rather than objective probabilities.” Not all incumbent fund-raising is actually aimed at the race at hand. Incumbents often have strategic purposes for fund-raising beyond campaign finance. Preemptive fund-raising is aimed at dissuading serious opponents. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., for example, sought to fend off challengers by amassing a “staggering war chest” early in the campaign cycle. Some members, especially those with party leadership ambitions, raise money so they can impress their colleagues by distributing funds to needier candidates. Sometimes, longtime incumbents deliberately overspend in pursuit of decisive electoral victories that might establish their claims for higher office.

Allocating Resources

As exercises in communication, campaigns are driven by the need to find a cost-effective way of reaching citizens and getting them to vote. Candidates and their managers face many different trade-offs as they make decisions about allocating resources, depending on the context.

As a rule, statewide Senate races are mass-media contests, with messages conveyed mainly through radio and television. Costs are especially high in densely populated states with large metropolitan media markets. Senate candidates typically spend far more on media advertising and fund-raising than do their House counterparts, who spend more on traditional means of voter contact.

Despite its astronomical costs, television advertising is popular because candidates believe it works. Almost all households in the United States own at least one television, and the average adult watches five hours of television a day. The 2018 congressional elections set new records for television advertising. Between January 1, 2017, and September 17, 2018, over 2.2 million election-related spots aired on television for House and Senate candidates, at a total estimated cost of nearly $1 billion. This level of spending on television advertisements was 70 percent more than the amount spent over the same period for the 2014 congressional races.
Candidates tailor their use of media to their political circumstances. Confident incumbents can channel their money into telephone, Internet and email, or door-to-door appeals that direct their messages to activists, partisans, and supporters. Lesser-known candidates must turn to broad-scale media, such as television, radio, newsletters, and billboards, to promote name recognition. Across the board, digital advertising has surged in importance. Fully $900 million was spent on digital ads to influence the 2018 midterm elections, a 260 percent increase over 2014.44

Candidates also have to make decisions about their pace of spending. Especially useful is early money—that is, having funds on hand to organize a campaign at the outset. EMILY’s List—Early Money Is Like Yeast (“It makes the ‘dough’ rise”)—a group begun in 1985, was formed on this premise. This group collects (bundles) individuals’ donations for Democratic women candidates who support abortion rights. The Republican counterpart is Women in the Senate and House (WISH).

Late-blitz money also can turn the tide, although money alone rarely makes the difference at the end of a race. In the final weeks of a hard-fought race, both sides are trying to reach undecided voters. “You’ve got to move that 10 or 15 percent, many of whom are not paying much attention,” a Democratic consultant explained. “Unfortunately, the way to do that is with negative or comparative ads.”45 Late in a competitive race, opponents frantically attack and—despite the scant time—counterattack.

Organizing the Campaign

Implementing a campaign strategy is the job of the candidates and their organizations. Waging a campaign is not for the fainthearted. Take the case of psychology professor Brian Baird. Having lost to the incumbent by a mere 887 votes in 1996, Baird vowed to run full tilt two years later. He spent almost all of his waking hours campaigning during the peak months (July–October)—more than ten hours a day for 123 days. Travel alone consumed many hours in his average-sized district, Washington’s Third (comprising Olympia and southwestern Washington state).46 Baird won by 10 percentage points in 1998 and went on to hold the seat until his retirement in 2010.

Candidates generally have to put together their own campaign organizations. Few localities today boast strong local parties. In some congressional districts, voter contact is the job of ward, precinct, and block captains. Candidates in some such areas still dispense “walking-around money” to encourage precinct captains to get out the vote and provide small financial rewards for voting. But in most places today, the traditional local parties have been replaced by hybrid organizations that partner with state and national parties and their allied interest groups.

When they can pay the price, today’s candidates purchase campaign services from political consulting firms, most of them operating within partisan networks.47 Consulting firms account for roughly 15 percent to 20 percent of
congressional campaign spending. Some firms offer a wide array of services; others specialize in polling, direct mail, phone banks, advertising, purchasing media time, coordinating volunteer efforts, fund-raising, or financial management and accounting. Despite the hype they often receive, it is by no means clear what consultants can really deliver in terms of election results. Consultants cannot turn a campaign around by themselves. At best, they can make the most of a candidate’s resources and help combat opponents’ attacks. They cannot compensate for an unskilled or lazy candidate or for a candidate whose partisanship or ideology is out of line with the district.

CAMPAIGN TECHNIQUES

Campaigns are designed to convey the candidate’s messages to people who will lend support and vote in the election. Campaigns are not necessarily directed at all voters. Often, narrower groups are targeted—most notably, the political party’s core supporters.

The Air War: Media and Other Mass Appeals

Candidates reach the largest numbers of voters by running broadcast ads and making televised appearances. Television is the broadest spectrum medium, and its costs eat up half of campaign budgets.

Candidates obviously cannot fully control their media coverage. Some of the most effective appeals—news coverage and endorsements, for example—are determined by persons other than the candidate. Because journalists can raise unwanted or hostile questions, many politicians seek out the friendlier environments of talk shows hosted by nonjournalists. Even more congenial are appeals the candidates themselves buy and pay for—newsletters, websites, media ads, and direct mail. The drawback is that self-promotion is seen as less credible than information from independent sources.

More than half of voters rely on television for their campaign news—network, cable, or local. About four in ten turn to the Internet for news, and 20 percent turn frequently to newspapers. And yet, local news programming largely ignores congressional campaign coverage. In the weeks preceding the 2012 elections, for example, 83 percent of the scheduled half-hour local news programs in a diverse sample of media markets offered no coverage at all of the U.S. House races in the area. For those media markets with a statewide Senate race, the “blackout rate” was also over 80 percent. Most candidates must therefore pay to reach the voters.

Positive Themes

Campaign themes typically seek to evoke positive responses from citizens. Positive ads present candidates in warm, human terms to which citizens
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can relate. Skillfully done, TV ads can be very effective in bringing home the candidate’s themes. A case in point was the series of brilliant, funny—and inexpensive—television ads that helped a little-known Wisconsin state legislator, Russ Feingold, win the Democratic primary, defeat a two-term incumbent senator, and then go on to serve three terms in the U.S. Senate (1993–2011). As his opponents battered each other with negative ads, Feingold ran clever, personal spots describing himself as the “underdog candidate.” One showed Elvis, alive and endorsing Feingold. Another showed Feingold walking through his modest home, opening up a closet and saying, “No skeletons.”

One of the best positive ads in 2018 was run by Rep. Pete Stauber, R-Minn., one of the only Republican candidates to flip a congressional district from the Democrats in a year where Republicans took widespread losses. In this ad, Stauber’s family holds up the series of uniforms he has worn in his life, including a Detroit Red Wings hockey jersey and a Duluth police officer’s uniform. The ad ends with Stauber assuring listeners that although he has worn a lot of uniforms in his life, he’s “not interested in any political party’s uniform” when he gets to Washington, DC.

Negative Themes

Candidates also deploy campaign resources against their opponents. Contrast ads distinguish the candidate from the opponent on the grounds of policy and experience, and attack ads strike at the opponent’s record or personal character. The race against Rep. Scott Garrett, R-N.J., featured one of the more striking attack ads of the 2016 cycle. Over a soundtrack playing “Dixie” and visuals of cotton fields, a voice narrates: “His views are perfect for rural Alabama. So why is Scott Garrett representing New Jersey? . . . Scott Garrett’s views might sound fine for the land of cotton, but we’re not singing his tune in New Jersey.” The cheesy soundtrack and the implied joke about southern rednecks lent the ad an undertone of mocking humor. Garrett was defeated for reelection by Josh Gottheimer, a former speechwriter to Bill Clinton.

Negative ads are common in modern campaigning because politicians believe they work. This strategy was forcefully described by Rep. Tom Cole, R-Okla., in a memo to his House colleagues: “Define your opponent immediately and unrelentingly. Do not let up—keep the tough ads running right up to election day. Don’t make the mistake of pulling your ads in favor of a positive rotation the last weekend.” Although neither positive nor negative ads have much effect on strong partisans, negative ads can sway citizens who have little information to begin with and on those with little or no party allegiance.

Although negative ads do at times stretch or distort the truth, they often serve an informing function. Research has shown that negative ads tend to lift voters’ information levels, even if the information conveyed is distorted or trivial. “We should not necessarily see negative ads as a harmful part of our electoral system,” argues Kenneth Goldstein, an expert on political advertising. “They are much
more likely [than positive ads] to be about policy, to use supporting information, and to be reliable. Few negative ads are on personal issues.\textsuperscript{54} As one deterrent to smear tactics, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 requires that candidates personally appear in and vouch for their advertisements.

**Evolving Mass Media**

The old-fashioned media—newspapers, radio, and television networks—are on the decline. The newspaper business in the United States, in particular, appears to be in crisis. Just since 2004, the circulation of daily newspapers has dropped by 43 percent.\textsuperscript{55} In tandem, the number of newsroom employees fell by 45 percent. The proportion of people who read newspapers continues to fall. Changing media even pose a threat to television, in that young people today rely far less on television news.

Meanwhile, the Internet is an increasingly important news source. In particular, younger adults tend to use social media as a main source of news.\textsuperscript{56} In fact, a large majority of U.S. adults—68 percent—now get news on social media, according to a new survey by Pew Research Center.\textsuperscript{57}

Since 2010, the use of social media has seen astronomical growth, especially Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Given these developments, candidates now recognize that social media has emerged as a vital way of communicating with supporters and cultivating their public image. They are investing increasing efforts in digital advertising and their social media presence.\textsuperscript{58} But one of the challenges of the medium is its uncontrollability and decentralization. Any individual or group can generate content that goes “viral.” Many of these viral stories turn out not to be true, but there is no recognized authority to warn readers away from disseminators of “fake news.” Members of Congress and their staff closely monitor what constituents are saying on social media—even just a handful of comments on social media are enough to attract their attention.\textsuperscript{59} As a means of campaign communications, Web outlets are unregulated. In 2006, the FEC decided to treat the Internet “as a unique and evolving mode of mass communication and political speech that warrants a restrained regulatory approach.”\textsuperscript{60}

**The Ground War: Pressing the Flesh and Other Forms of Close Contact**

Direct appeals to voters through personal appearances by candidates or their surrogates—at shopping centers, factory gates, or even door-to-door—are part of every campaign. In his successful 1948 Senate campaign, Lyndon B. Johnson swooped out of the sky in a helicopter to visit small Texas towns, grandly pitching his Stetson from the chopper for a bold entrance; an aide was assigned to retrieve the hat for use at the next stop.\textsuperscript{61} Other candidates, preferring to stay closer to the ground, stage walking tours or other events to attract attention. Few elected officials get by without doing a great deal of what is inelegantly called *pressing the flesh.*
Recent social science research has demonstrated the importance of retail, as opposed to wholesale, campaigning. TV ads, direct mail, and phone banks are less effective than old-fashioned ways of getting out the vote. An array of experiments has shown that personalized messages delivered face-to-face or in a conversational manner over the phone are far superior to impersonal methods of reaching potential voters. According to Yale political scientists Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, face-to-face canvassing raises turnout by seven to twelve percentage points. One-on-one campaigning is physically and emotionally challenging. But an obvious advantage of so-called *shoe-leather campaigning* is cost, at least when compared with mass-media appeals. “Door-to-door canvassing is the tactic of choice among candidates and campaigns that are short on cash,” explain Green and Gerber. “Precinct walking is often described as the weapon of underdogs.” Former representative Dan Glickman, D-Kan. (1977–1995), describes his first House campaign as a thirty-one-year-old challenger facing a long-term incumbent:

I walked door-to-door to 35,000 homes over an eight-month period. I walked from 10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and again from 5:30 to 8 p.m. I lost 35 pounds and learned to be very realistic about dogs. I met a woman my father had lent $100 or $150 to 30 years before. She embraced me and said, “You saved us.” I won by three percentage points.

Face-to-face campaigning is obligatory in smaller communities, where people expect politicians to show up at festivals, parades, or annual county fairs. “If you ain’t seen at the county fair, you’re preached about on Sunday,” remarked a politician as he led his party’s Senate candidate around the hog and sheep barns in Ada, Oklahoma. In small states, first-name relationships are often valued. “They want to know you,” political scientist Garrison Nelson remarked about Vermont voters. The state’s independent senator, Bernard Sanders, has long distributed bumper stickers that simply say, “Bernie.” In Bristol, on Rhode Island’s coast, the Fourth of July parade—the oldest in the country—is “the first and perhaps biggest event of the campaign season.”

**Getting Out the Vote**

GOTV drives are focused on registering constituents to vote and then getting voters to the polls. Recognizing the importance of personalized voter contact, both parties have developed sophisticated GOTV operations. Each now relies on *microtargeting* to reach sympathetic voters. This approach employs computer models to exploit a wide array of data, such as the groups to which people belong or the magazines they read, to identify potential voters and the issues that are important to them. “Micro-targeting has become so widespread that it is now used by all House and Senate candidates, on both sides, in state legislative races, and in some cases, all the way down the ballot to local school board elections,” concludes one journalist. In addition, many groups finance their
own field operations in support of favored candidates. In this sense, the parties’ GOTV efforts are just part of a broader campaign waged by their allied groups. For example, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) knocked on 3.6 million potential voters’ doors and sent over 700,000 text messages before the 2018 midterm election. For their part, Republicans depend on a wide array of pro-life, evangelical, and socially conservative organizations to undertake GOTV drives for their candidates.

The Parallel Campaigns

The scene is a hospital operating room; the patient is surrounded by surgeons and nurses. One surgeon, in a voice of astonishment, exclaims, “Oh my.” A nurse asks, “Colitis?” Another nurse asks, “Hepatitis?” A third, “Diverticulitis?” The surgeon replies, “No, I’m afraid it’s Dina Titus. Taxes up the yingyang. Her tax policy is killing us.” The target of this television ad was 2008 Democratic House candidate Dina Titus, a former political science professor at the University of Nevada–Las Vegas and current representative for Nevada’s First Congressional District. The ad was paid for by Freedom’s Watch, a lobbying group bankrolled by wealthy conservatives, notably billionaire casino developer Sheldon Adelson.

The huge increase in spending by outside groups discussed previously means that campaigns no longer resemble boxing matches between two combatants. They have become free-for-alls in which multiple combatants throw punches and land roundhouse kicks. Candidates compete not only against their opponents and their parties but also against scores of groups that join the fray.

Hundreds of such organizations engage in congressional campaigning, most of them favoring one or the other major political party. As allies of a national party, these organizations contribute to the “nationalization” of congressional elections. The ads these organizations run tend to reinforce existing stereotypes about the parties. In 2018, Republican candidates all around the country were lambasted as hostile to health insurance protection for people with preexisting conditions. Democratic candidates everywhere were painted as supporters of “Nancy Pelosi’s liberal agenda.” Such ads undercut candidates’ ability to control their own political image. As outside-group spending becomes a paramount element of campaign finance, it becomes harder for candidates to differentiate themselves from their national parties. Candidates in swing states or districts attempting to carve out distinctive profiles run up against their opponents’ super PAC–funded ads that paint with a broad brush, lumping them in with the rest of their party’s team.

WHO VOTES?

Although Congress is supposed to be the people’s branch of government, less than half of voting-age citizens normally take part in House elections. In the 2014 House elections, just 36.7 percent of the voting-eligible population or VEP
(all eligible residents age eighteen and over) participated. In 2018, however, turnout was 50.3 percent—the highest voter turnout for any midterm election since 1914.

As Figure 4-3 indicates, turnout varies according to whether the election is held in a presidential or a midterm year. Midterm races lack the intense publicity and stimulus to vote provided by presidential contests. Since the 1930s, turnout in midterm congressional elections has averaged about twelve percentage points below that of the preceding presidential election. Midterm electorates include a greater share of people who are interested in politics and—not unrelated—who are also more affluent and better educated.

Reasons for Not Voting

Political analysts disagree over the reasons for the anemic voting levels in the United States, which are near the bottom among established democratic countries. Several explanations—not all of them compatible—have been suggested. One explanation for nonvoting is simply demographic. Groups with low voting rates, such as young people, African Americans, and Latinos, have been growing as a share of the U.S. population. Young people (ages eighteen through twenty-nine) are traditional no-shows, perhaps because they have fewer of the life experiences (mortgages, taxes, school-age children, and community ties) that propel older people toward activism. Four out of ten young people have not registered to vote (three times greater than those aged fifty and older). Turnout among young Americans in the 2018 midterms was estimated at 31 percent.

A second explanation stresses legal barriers to voting. More than 20 percent of Americans are not registered to vote. Many democracies automatically register all adults; some even require that people vote. By contrast, U.S. citizens must take the initiative to register and vote.

Other disincentives can be blamed on electoral arrangements. U.S. citizens are asked to vote far more often than are voters in parliamentary regimes; and elections are held on weekdays, not on weekends or national holidays. States have moved in contrary reform directions. A number of states and districts have changed their election procedures to make it easier to register and vote. Absentee balloting and voting by mail have become more common. Some states permit ballots to be submitted over a period of time. Oregon citizens may even vote by telephone. At the same time, lawmakers in other states have raised new barriers through voter ID requirements—such as photo IDs or proof-of-citizenship papers. Although passed under the pretext of combating voter fraud, these are widely understood as partisan measures intended “to depress voter turnout in minority and poor communities.” In 2008, the Supreme Court upheld the strictest such law, Indiana’s statute that requires all voters to present a valid government ID. The Supreme Court’s Shelby County v. Holder (2013) decision overturning the Voting Rights Act of 1965’s requirement for preclearance of changes in voting rules in states with a history of discrimination opened the door to more states adopting tight
FIGURE 4-3  ■ Turnout in Presidential and Congressional Elections, 1946–2018

voter ID laws. Hours after the Supreme Court’s ruling, the state of Texas began enforcing a strict photo identification requirement for voting.\textsuperscript{80}

Biased or careless election administration can also turn away voters or lead to a miscount of their ballots, as uncovered in voting scandals in Florida and Georgia in 2018. Local election practices often weigh most heavily on minority or socio-economically disadvantaged citizens, who are more likely to encounter insufficient numbers of poll workers, antiquated or badly designed voting machines, and longer lines.

A final explanation for low voter turnout is citizen disaffection, apathy, and cynicism. Many non-voters simply believe that their vote will not make a difference, all candidates make false promises, and elections cannot bring about meaningful change. Noncompetitive elections, poor candidates, and contentious or negative campaigning are also thought to keep people away from the polling booths.

**Biases of Voting**

Although voting is the simplest and most accessible form of political involvement, it is still biased in favor of people at the higher rungs of the social and generational ladders—those who are older, more affluent, better educated, and more in touch with political events. Social class has a stronger effect on voting participation than race, ethnicity, and gender. According to political scientists Jan E. Leighley and Jonathan Nagler, almost 80 percent of high-income earners vote, compared to barely 50 percent of low-income Americans.\textsuperscript{81}

**HOW VOTERS DECIDE**

What induces voters to cast their ballots for one candidate and not another? As a general rule, voters reach their decisions on the basis of party loyalty. But candidate assessments and salient issues also figure into voters’ decisions. The relative strength of these elements varies over time and among specific races.

Although U.S. voters are often uninformed or indifferent about political issues and candidates, they employ what is called low-information rationality or gut reasoning to make voting booth decisions. As Samuel L. Popkin explains, people “triangulate and validate their opinions in conversations with people they trust and according to the opinions of national figures whose judgments and positions they have come to know.”\textsuperscript{82} Thus, voters work through imperfect information to make choices that will often roughly approximate the choices they would have made with more perfect information.

**Party Loyalties**

Party identification is the single most powerful factor in determining voters’ choices. And it remains the strongest single correlate of voting in congressional
elections. In recent elections, at least nine in every ten Democrats and Republicans voted for their parties’ nominees. Independents tend to split their votes more evenly between the parties. In 2014, independents preferred Republican to Democratic candidates by twelve percentage points. In 2018, however, independents preferred Democrats by thirteen percentage points.

According to surveys, most people who claim to be independents are, in fact, closet partisans who lean toward one party or the other. These independent leaners—about a quarter of the total electorate—hold attitudes similar to those of partisans. Not only do they favor one party over the other, but they also share many (though not necessarily all) of the party’s values and will vote for the party’s candidates—if they vote at all.

Only a small percentage of citizens (about 13 percent) are true independents; they are unpredictable, however, and have dismal turnout rates. “I would encourage candidates not to play to them,” advises David Magleby of Brigham Young University, “because they tend to jump on bandwagons, to follow tides. You’re better off [working] on getting your weak partisans and your leaners.”

Partisan Resurgence

Today’s voters are as loyal to their professed party identification as they have ever been. Few voters who identify as either Republican or Democrat defect from their party when they cast votes in congressional races.

This increase in party loyalty represents a major shift. Between 1950 and 1980, partisan loyalty declined among the U.S. electorate, with voters identifying with one party and often supporting candidates from the other party. These weakened party ties led to an epidemic of split-ticket voting—that is, voters supporting one party’s presidential candidate and the opposition party’s congressional candidate. Between 1952 and 1988, the number of voters who reported in surveys that they split their ticket between presidential and House candidates rose from 12 percent to 25 percent. Those who split their ballots between different parties’ House and Senate candidates grew from 9 percent to 27 percent.

Most of these ticket-splitters, it turned out, were in the throes of moving from one party to another. White southern conservatives made up a large share of ticket-splitters during this era. Targeted by the GOP’s so-called southern strategy, these voters were attracted to presidential candidates such as Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan. At the same time, southern conservatives continued to back Democrats in congressional and state races, as strong Republican candidates often failed to challenge entrenched incumbents—because the Democratic Party put up conservative candidates and because long-serving Democrats won the “personal vote” of constituents by delivering more benefits back home through their party’s control of legislative chambers. The same phenomenon occurred to a lesser degree in the Northeast, where voters were drawn to the Democrats’ national policies and candidates but continued to support moderate-to-liberal Republican representatives or senators. Recent party realignment has brought party affiliation into sync with policy and ideological preferences.
In retrospect, the bulge in split-ticket voting seems to have been a by-product of a gradual partisan realignment. Over the last six presidential elections, ticket-splitting has plummeted to less than 10 percent—exactly the same level it was fifty years ago. The number of congressional districts voting for one party’s presidential candidate and the other party’s House candidate fell as well. In 2016, only around 8 percent of districts voted for one party for the House and the other party for president. Just twenty-three House Republicans won in districts that were carried by Hillary Clinton while twelve Democrats won in districts that voted for Donald Trump.90

**Midterm and Presidential Election Years**

Politicians have long talked about *coattails*: how House and Senate candidates could be pulled into office by the strength of a popular presidential candidate. The idea is that successful presidential candidates will entice new voters, not just for themselves but for their whole party.

In presidential election years, the party that wins the presidency typically does increase its numbers in Congress. As shown in Figure 4-4, the winning presidential candidate’s party usually improves its margins in Congress. Over the presidential elections since 1932, the president’s party gained, on average, 15.1 seats in the House and 2.1 seats in the Senate. Boosts for the president’s congressional party have been considerably more modest in recent election years than they were in the 1930s and 1940s. George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Donald J. Trump all began their presidencies with some congressional seat losses for their party. Nevertheless, political scientists who have analyzed the influence of presidential candidates on the outcome of congressional elections have found “nontrivial coattail effects.”91 In 1996, President Clinton’s reelection added about 2.6 percentage points to Democrats’ House and Senate totals.92 President Obama began his presidency with the largest increases in his party’s numbers in Congress for any president since Reagan in 1980.

As is evident in Figure 4-5, the president’s party almost always suffers significant reversals in the congressional elections that take place in nonpresidential election years. In fact, the president’s party has lost seats in thirty-seven of the thirty-nine midterm elections since 1860. “This is not quite the certainty of ‘death and taxes,’ but it is about as dependable as things get in politics,” observes political scientist James E. Campbell.93 Since 1934, the presidential party has lost an average of 28 House seats and 3.6 Senate seats in midterm elections.

The *midterm law* was broken on only three occasions. Democrats gained four seats in the House and held their own in the Senate in 1998, in the midst of impeachment proceedings against President Clinton that were unpopular with the public. In 2002, President George W. Bush’s GOP gained eight House seats and one Senate seat, no doubt because of the post-9/11 rally effect. The only other anomaly occurred in 1934, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s popularity strengthened the Democrats’ grip on both chambers. The president party’s loss of 40 House seats in the 2018 midterms, Republicans’ most serious midterm setback
FIGURE 4-4  ■ Seats in Congress Gained or Lost by the President’s Party in Presidential Election Years, 1932–2016

Source: Compiled by the authors.

FIGURE 4-5  ■ Midterm Fortunes of Presidential Parties, 1934–2018

Sources: CQ Press Electronic Library, Vital Statistics on American Politics Online Edition, Table 1–17. Originally published in Harold W. Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, eds., Vital Statistics on American Politics, 2009–2010 (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2009). Each entry is the difference between the number of seats held by the president’s party at the start of Congress after the midterm election and the number of seats held by that party at the start of Congress after the preceding general election. Special elections that shifted partisan seat totals between elections are not noted.
since the elections of 1974, adhered to the usual historic pattern. Unusually, however, Republicans picked up two seats in the Senate in 2018, only the fourth midterm since 1910 in which the president’s party gained seats in the Senate while losing seats in the House.

One theory that endeavors to explain the pattern of midterm loss is known as **surge and decline**. This theory posits that the visibility and excitement of a winning presidential campaign attracts intermittent voters who tend to support the president’s party in down-ticket races. When these presidential candidates are not on the ballot, the shrunken electorate of midterm years contains fewer supporters of the president’s party—that is, a presidential surge, swollen by less motivated voters attracted by presidential campaigns, is followed two years later by a decline as intermittent voters drop out of the electorate. But other studies suggest that midterm voters are no more or less partisan than those in presidential years and share most of their demographic characteristics. Another problem with the theory is that, no matter the circumstances, the president’s party typically loses more seats at the midterm than it gains during a presidential year. Comparing Figures 4-4 and 4-5, it is also clear that the president’s party more consistently loses seats at the midterms than it gains seats during presidential election years.

A second theory argues that midterm elections serve, in part, as a referendum on the president’s popularity and performance in office during the previous two years. Voters may hold the president’s party responsible for economic reverses, unpopular policies, or military ventures, and the president’s party tends to suffer bigger losses when the president is unpopular. Even so, the president’s party typically loses seats in Congress at midterms even when approval ratings of the president exceed 50 percent. The 2010, 2014, and 2018 midterm elections were all seen as referenda on the president’s performance. For his part, President Trump simply embraced this reality. “I’m not on the ticket, but I am on the ticket, because this is a referendum about me,” Trump said at a rally in Southhaven, Mississippi. “I want you to vote. Pretend I’m on the ballot.” In the end, Republicans’ 40-seat loss in the House fell directly in line with projections for a midterm election under a president with an approval rating of around 42 percent.

A third theory emphasizes voters’ preferences for “balance.” By favoring the out-party at the midterm, voters can pull policy back toward the ideological center. Voter behavior may not be driven so much by dissatisfaction with the president as by the desire to check potential presidential excesses. This may seem like an overly sophisticated calculation for the average voter, but even if only a relatively small portion of the electorate follows this logic, it can have a sizable impact on electoral outcomes. Balance theory helps explain why the shift against the president’s party in midterm elections is typically larger than one would expect based on presidents’ approval ratings or based on the surge-and-decline thesis. All three schools of thought—surge and decline, referendum theory, and balance theory—can shed light on such dramatic midterm outcomes as the Democrats’ 1974 post-Watergate bonus of forty-eight representatives and five senators, the Democrats’ retaking of House and Senate majorities in 2006,
the Republicans’ gain of sixty-three representatives and six senators in 2010, and the Democrats’ return to the House majority in 2018.

The Appeal of Candidates

“My theory on politics is ultimately that people vote for the person they like most,” declared former senator David Pryor, D-Ark. (1979–1997). Apart from partisan loyalties, the appeal of given candidates is the strongest force in congressional voting. Not surprisingly, candidate appeal normally tilts toward incumbents. When voters abandon their party to vote for House or Senate candidates, they usually vote for incumbents.

Incumbency Advantage

Incumbents rarely lose their bids for reelection, as is evident in Table 4-1. Incumbent reelection rates have consistently been robust. Even in the 2010 watershed election, incumbent winners still included 85 percent of all representatives and 83 percent of all senators who ran for reelection. Likewise in 2018, despite the dramatic congressional turnover and the change of majority control, 90 percent of House incumbents who ran won reelection along with 83 percent of Senate incumbents.

Defeating a House incumbent is an uphill struggle, absent a scandal or misstep. Senate challengers—usually well known and generously financed—have a stronger chance of unseating incumbents than do those seeking House seats. Nevertheless, more than four out of five Senate incumbents win the contests they enter.

Why are incumbents so formidable? Incumbents’ electoral success rates have historically exceeded what one should expect based on the partisan character of their constituencies. In other words, incumbents were long able to win by solid margins even in constituencies closely divided between Republicans and Democrats.

This phenomenon led scholars to ask whether the sheer fact of incumbency itself offers advantages: Do candidates fare better running as incumbents than they would running as nonincumbents? To measure this advantage, scholars often look to the sophomore surge and the retirement slump. The sophomore surge refers to the average gain in vote share by candidates running for reelection for the first time, compared with their performance in their first election. The retirement slump is the average drop in a party’s vote share when an incumbent retires and the seat opens up. Scholars then average these two calculations into a single index, known as the slurge, which is often used to measure the overall incumbency advantage. According to this measure, incumbents enjoyed about a 6 to 8 percent boost in their share of the vote simply by virtue of being incumbents from the mid-1960s through the 1990s.

The incumbency advantage has fallen dramatically in recent years, as rising levels of partisan voting and conflict in Washington make it hard for individual
TABLE 4-1 ■ Reelection Rates in the House and Senate, by Decade, 1950s–2000s, Plus 2012–2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Sought re-election</th>
<th>Faced no opponent</th>
<th>Lost primary</th>
<th>General election</th>
<th>Percent reelected</th>
<th>Sought re-election</th>
<th>Faced no opponent</th>
<th>Lost primary</th>
<th>General election</th>
<th>Percent reelected</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>93.2%</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>77.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>91.5%</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>92.3%</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>95.7%</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>88.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>93.6%</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>87.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>93.2%</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>87.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>91.1%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>91.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>95.9%</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>88.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>97.0%</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>93.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>90.2%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>82.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012–2018</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>93.4%</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>84.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: CQ Weekly

Note: Statistics for each decade are election-year averages for the five elections conducted under that decade’s apportionment of House districts. For example, the 1950s include the five elections 1952 through 1960. “Percent reelected” takes into account both primary and general election defeats. “Faced no opponent” means no major-party opponent.
politicians to separate themselves from their parties. The estimated slurge hit a low of three points in 2014 and then fell even lower in 2016 and 2018.101

The small edge contemporary members possess by virtue of being incumbents offers only a modest buffer against adverse electoral conditions. The contemporary decline in incumbency advantage is remarkable when one considers the range of assets incumbents possess that challengers do not have. Because many contributors are just seeking access to officeholders, incumbents find it much easier to raise money than challengers (see “Incumbents versus Challengers”). Incumbents are also better known than their opponents. Across American National Election Study (ANES) surveys spanning almost thirty years, nearly all respondents were able to recognize the names of and offer opinions about their Senate and House incumbents running for reelection (means of 97 percent and 92 percent, respectively). Senate challengers were recognized and rated by 77 percent of the respondents, House challengers by only 53 percent.102

Incumbents are also able to cultivate constituency support by leveraging their perquisites of office. The typical House member receives staff, office, and travel allocations valued at between $2.5 and $3 million over a two-year term; senators, with six-year terms, command on average $20 million in resources.103

Still, in the end, recent elections suggest that none of incumbents’ assets matter nearly so much as the underlying partisan tilt of their constituency. As political scientist Gary Jacobson concludes from a study of the 2018 elections: “By virtually every measure the 2018 referendum on the Trump presidency resulted in the most partisan, nationalized, and president-centered midterm elections yet observed.”104 Incumbents’ perquisites of office, personal visibility, name recognition, and fundraising capabilities buy them very limited protection in today’s electoral circumstances. Indeed, Senate incumbents in 2018 enjoyed no detectable advantage at all.105

Senate and House

Senators have long been more vulnerable at the polls than their House counterparts. Senate contests are widely reported, and Senate challengers get a lot of media exposure. Media coverage of House races is more fragmentary than that of Senate races. Senators thus have less ability to shape their image than representatives do. Voters get their information about Senate races largely through the organized media, which senators do not control. Representatives gain exposure through focused means—personal appearances, mailings, newsletters, and social media—which they can fashion to their own advantage. “Somewhat ironically,” observes Michael J. Robinson, “powerful senators are less able to control their images than ‘invisible’ House members.”106

Strategic Politicians

One should not interpret incumbent reelection rates as a measure of incumbency advantage. Incumbents win a large share of the races they enter in great part because they behave strategically. Many incumbents retire or seek other
office when facing a significant likelihood of defeat. In 2018, for example, many Republicans opted to step aside rather than run the risk of losing. Republican retirements were heavily concentrated in districts that had voted for Hillary Clinton or only narrowly for Donald Trump in 2016. All told, forty Republican incumbents declined to run for reelection, a postwar record for the party. Meanwhile, recognizing a favorable electoral environment, only 20 Democratic incumbents retired, nearly half of those to run for higher office. Strategic anticipation of this kind happens in most election years, though not always to such an obvious extent. The clear lesson is that incumbents win at high rates in significant part because they are able to anticipate when they can win, not because they have insulated themselves against electoral accountability.

**Issue Voting**

Issue preferences and even ideological beliefs figure prominently in voters’ decisions. Even if most Americans devote only modest attention to political affairs, a significant number of voters are attuned to issues and base their choices on a specific issue or cluster of issues. Not a few elections turn on those margins.

**Congressional Party Platforms**

Partisans care deeply about the issues with which their parties are linked. In studying the 1998 House elections, Owen G. Abbe and his colleagues found that “voters are more likely to support candidates whom they deem competent on their issues.” They concluded that “party leaders and individual candidates must campaign on a well-defined agenda for party-owned issues to have an impact.”

At least since the mid-1970s, congressional parties have forged campaign platforms. The most notable example was the GOP’s “Contract with America,” the brainchild of then-representative Newt Gingrich of Georgia. The contract was a set of ten proposals that candidates promised to bring to the House floor if Republicans won a majority in the 1994 midterm elections. Similarly, more than a year before the 2006 balloting, House Democrats, led by the minority leader, Nancy Pelosi of California, came up with another list of initiatives known as the “Six for ’06” platform, embracing such popular goals as national security, energy independence, and economic strength. In the lead-up to the 2016 elections, congressional Republicans touted a platform called “A Better Way,” including tax cuts and tax reform, increased border security, and rollbacks of regulations, among others. Although the effort got only limited media attention, House and Senate Democrats rolled out their “Better Deal for our Democracy” platform in the spring of 2018, a package of voting rights, campaign finance, ethics, and lobbying reforms.

**Issues and Partisanship**

Voters’ responses to political issues show up in the different patterns of choice displayed by demographic groups (see Figure 4-6). Americans sort themselves
### FIGURE 4-6  ■ Who Were the Voters in 2018?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of voters</th>
<th>For Democrat</th>
<th>For Republican</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 30 years</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–44 years</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–64 years</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 years and older</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate or less</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate study</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small city/rural</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburbs</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Urban”</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant or other Christian</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>56.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Something Else</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income &lt; $50,000</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000–$99,999</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000 or more</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Data from CNN 2018 election polls at https://www.cnn.com/election/2018/exit-polls.

**Notes:** National exit poll results from interviews of 18,778 respondents randomly selected voters as they exited voting places across the country on November 6 and previously over the telephone for absentee and early voters. The poll was conducted by Edison Media Research for the National Election Pool, the *Washington Post*, and other media organizations. Typical characteristics have a margin of sampling error of plus or minus four percentage points.
out politically according to their age, sex, income, education, race or ethnicity, region, and even by frequency of attendance at religious services.

A demographic snapshot of the two parties’ voters would start at the much-discussed gender gap, the difference in voting between men and women. Women lean toward Democratic candidates; men lean toward Republicans. The gender gap has long been a fact of electoral life. As pollster Celinda Lake remarked, “You’ll get [a gender gap] in a race for dogcatcher in Montana, if it’s a Republican against a Democrat.” But in recent years, the gender gap has surged in importance. While the gender gap was a significant eight points in 2012 and ten points in 2014, it more than doubled to 22 points in 2016 and 23 in 2018. The explanation for the gender gap probably lies in differing responses to political and social issues. Men are more apt to favor military expenditures, tough anticrime laws, and restrictions on welfare recipients and immigrants. Women are more supportive of social programs, such as government-sponsored health benefits, job training, childcare, and assistance to needy families.

A host of similar demographic effects is evident among congressional voters. “There’s a family gap, a generation gap, a gender gap,” said GOP pollster Neil Newhouse of the fissures among the voting population. Many of the patterns are familiar. The Republicans attract upper-income and conservative voters; the Democrats traditionally engage lower-income and liberal voters. The Republicans draw upon married people, whites, regular churchgoers, gun owners, small-business owners, and older people; the Democrats attract singles and young people, African Americans, Hispanics, Jews, the secular, and occasional churchgoers. Increasingly, Republicans do well with less-educated white voters, while Democrats do better among college-educated whites. Such loyalties are built on issues and themes adopted by parties and candidates over the years.

Issues and Campaigns

Legislators and their advisers try to anticipate voters’ reactions to their issue stances. They devote much energy to framing positions, communicating them (sometimes in deliberately vague language), and assessing their effect. Moreover, every professional politician can relate cases in which issues tipped an election one way or another. Frequently cited is the electoral influence of single-interest groups. Some citizens vote according to a single issue they regard as paramount—for example, gun control, abortion, or gay marriage. Even if few in number, such voters can decide close contests. For that reason, legislators often shrink from taking positions on such hot-button issues.

Public-policy issues also have powerful indirect effects on election outcomes. Issues motivate opinion leaders, who can influence support far beyond their own single vote. Organized interests also carefully monitor lawmakers’ behavior and then channel or withhold funds, publicity, and other campaign assistance accordingly. Legislators devote time and attention to promoting and explaining issues to attentive publics because it pays for them to do so.
ELECTION OUTCOMES

The two Congresses are apparent throughout congressional elections. House and Senate contests are waged one by one on local turf but always against a backdrop of national events, issues, and partisan alignments. The involvement of national party entities and their allied interest groups has imposed a greater degree of national coordination on congressional campaigns, especially those in marginal states and districts. The resulting fusion of local and national forces shapes the content and results of congressional elections.

Party Balance

Despite the oft-claimed independence of candidates and voters, almost all races are run under either the Democratic or Republican Party label, fought on playing fields tilted toward one party or the other, and aimed mainly at loyalists who are likely to turn out for their party’s candidates.

Shifting Majorities

In some respects, the overall partisan outcome of the 2018 contests was fixed months and even years before the actual balloting. Of the four political science forecasting models published by *P.S.: Political Science and Politics* before the 2018 midterms, all predicted that Democrats would win control of the House of Representatives but that Republicans would retain control of the Senate. The models accurately forecasted the specific seat swing, as well. Models for the House projected that Republicans would lose between 27 and 44 seats, with an average loss of 36 seats across the models. For the Senate, the models forecast that Republicans would either break even or gain up to two seats. These models rely upon simple indicators: Is this a midterm or presidential election year? What is the president’s approval rating in public polls? What party do voters say they prefer to control Congress on the “generic ballot.” In the end, the 2018 Republicans lost 40 seats in the House and gained two in the Senate, an outcome that was thus expected months in advance of election day.

Taking a longer view, the outcome was predictable in that either the Democrats or the Republicans have controlled Congress since 1855. (See Appendix A for a list of the partisan majorities in the House and Senate since 1901.) For a decade after the Civil War and for the first third of the 20th century, Republicans were the dominant party in American national government. Republicans controlled Congress and the presidency for most of the period between 1896 and 1932.

on Capitol Hill. Incumbency advantage seemed to make it impossible for congressional Republicans to overcome Democratic dominance, even in election years when voters strongly backed Republican presidential candidates. During the long years of Democratic ascendency across so much of the twentieth century, conventional wisdom had come to view Democrats as the nation’s permanent majority in Congress.

The struggle for party control of national government has been much more competitive in recent decades. Neither party has been able to take control of Congress for granted. Since Republicans won control of the Senate in 1980, no party has controlled a Senate majority for longer than eight years. Control of the House has also been closely competitive since the Republican victory of 1994. Even though Republicans clung to their post-1994 majority in the House for twelve years, Democrats steadily gained seats throughout the 1990s, and Republicans’ control of the chamber progressively narrowed. Democrats returned to majority status in both the House and the Senate in 2006 and expanded their margins of control in the 2008 elections.

But in 2010, all the House Democratic gains of 2006 and 2008 were wiped out. Republicans retook House control in 2010, retained their majority in 2012 with minimal losses, and then expanded their majority again in 2014. The 2015–2016 Republicans held their largest House majority since 1927. On Capitol Hill, the 2016 elections were largely a wash, with Republicans retaining a two-seat majority in the Senate and a forty-seven-seat majority in the House. But the Republican House majority could not withstand the backlash against an unpopular Republican president, with Democrats returning back to the House majority in 2019.

Political scientist Mo Fiorina terms our current era of seesawing party control an era of “tenuous majorities.” Taking stock of party control of House, Senate, and presidency, he notes that the twelve elections since 1992 “have produced six different patterns of majority control of our three national elective arenas.” With another fierce battle for congressional majorities looming again in 2020, two-party competition for control of Congress has yet to come to an end.

Regional Patterns

Recent elections have cemented long-term shifts in the two parties’ power bases. Historically, the Grand Old Party was dominant in the populous states of the Northeast and Midwest. “The Democracy,” by contrast, owned the solid South from the Civil War era through the 1970s, as well as the large urban political machines. Today, many of the old patterns are precisely reversed, with the Republican Party dominant in the South and the Democratic Party ascendant in the Northeast. The tectonic plates of political alliances move slowly, but they sometimes produce changes of earthquake proportions.

The 1994 earthquake signaled the Republicans’ conquest of the South. For the first time in history, the GOP claimed a majority of the South’s seats. The party’s grip on the region continued to tighten in subsequent election cycles. By
2019, Republicans held 65 percent of House seats and 86 percent of Senate seats belonging to the eleven states of the former Confederacy. The modern-day GOP is currently the party of choice for conservative white southerners.

As shown in the map displayed in Figure 4-7, the South, the Great Plains, and the Mountain West form the backbone of the congressional GOP. Fully 45 percent of the House Republican Conference hails from the South, even though that region accounts for only a third of the chamber’s seats. Southerners also make up more than one third of Senate Republicans, even though the region only includes a quarter of Senate seats. In its other regional bastions, the Great Plains and the Mountain West, Republicans claim 79 percent of Senate seats and 63 percent of House districts. Taken together, representatives from the South, Great Plains, and Mountain West regions account for the majority of the GOP’s House and Senate contingents. The Great Lakes states constitute a competitive region, with Republicans controlling 55 percent of its House seats but only one-quarter of its Senate seats.

Democrats are strongest on the coastal edges of the national map—the Northeast, the mid-Atlantic, and the West Coast. The eleven states of New England and the mid-Atlantic are overwhelmingly Democratic. In these states—all but one of which were in the Democratic Party’s column in the last four presidential elections—the party claims 87 percent of House seats and 91 percent of Senate seats. In New England, Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, holds the only
Republican seat in either House or Senate. Similarly, Democrats dominate the country’s western coast. All four Pacific Rim states (excluding Alaska) were won by Democratic candidates in the last four presidential elections. In the 116th Congress (2019–2020), Democrats controlled fifty-nine of the region’s seventy House seats and all eight of its Senate seats.

Looking beyond such regional patterns, the two parties tend to represent different kinds of districts. Democratic strength lies in cities, inner suburbs, and majority-minority districts, including those in the South and Midwest. Republicans dominate rural, small-town, and exurban areas. Democratic voters tend to be more packed together geographically, with Democrats clustered together in the nation’s densely populated urban areas. As a result, Democratic House members tend to win by larger margins than Republicans. Put another way, more Democratic votes are wasted (that is, inefficiently distributed across congressional districts), giving the GOP a structural advantage in congressional elections.

The regional divides between the parties have become more pronounced during the Trump presidency. In particular, Republicans have lost significant support in upscale suburbia. In 2018, Democrats swept Republicans across prosperous suburbs around the country, most notably in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Southern California. Districts represented by Republicans now have markedly lower educational attainment than districts represented by Democrats, with three-quarters of Republican districts lagging behind the national average of residents with a college degree. Meanwhile, Democrats now represent more than three-fifths of House districts with a higher than median average income.

Polarized Parties, Polarized Voters?

Underlying this geographic distribution is what might be called a cultural divide between the two parties. Democrats tend to represent urban areas, where most voters favor social welfare spending and environmental and other business regulations. Urban voters also tend to take a more tolerant view of the diversity of racial, ethnic, and sexual identities. Republicans tend to be traditionalists—economic and cultural conservatives who promote businesses large and small, advocate certain religious causes, and generously support military expenditures.

How pervasive are these partisan differences within the electorate? Politically active citizens—candidates, officeholders, party activists, and strong party identifiers—but are clearly sorted by ideology: Democrats to the left, Republicans to the right. Such activists do not represent the majority of citizens, average voters, or even average party identifiers. Most voters either identify as “moderate” or reject any ideological term to describe themselves. Rank-and-file party identifiers have, however, become more ideologically polarized than in the past. Clearly, many voters have responded to the rising amount of ideological rhetoric in the contemporary political arena, including that dispensed by biased cable, Internet, and other partisan communications.
Party Alignment and Realignment

Historically, some political upheavals have shifted party control in the House or Senate with decisive, enduring results. Political scientists and journalists refer to critical elections or critical periods, in which one party yields preeminence to another, or major voting groups alter the shape of the parties’ coalitions, or both. Such watershed eras include the Civil War, the turbulent 1890s, the New Deal of the 1930s, and the Republican revolution of 1994. Each of these upheavals brought to Capitol Hill new lawmakers, new voting patterns, and new legislative priorities.124

Between the civil rights upheavals of the 1960s and the mid-1990s, the congressional party system went through a gradual transformation that realigned the parties on ideological lines and brought them into competitive balance. The Republican Party achieved ideological consistency by attracting southern and rural conservatives and by shedding most of its moderate wing, especially members from the northeastern, mid-Atlantic, and Pacific Rim states. In losing most of the South to Republicans, the Democrats also became more ideologically coherent. Long split by divisions between conservative southerners and northern liberals, by the 1990s, the Democratic Party was smaller than in the past but considerably more unified.

Realignments of the party system are only apparent in hindsight. It is now clear that neither the House Democratic majorities of the 110th and 111th Congresses (2007–2010) nor the House Republican majorities of the 112th–115th Congresses (2011–2018) were grounded in any long-term shifts of voter alliances. Today’s party system remains in the same tight competitive balance characteristic of the 1990s.

Turnover and Representation

Reelection rates should not be confused with turnover rates. Even in years when few members are turned out of office by the voters, many leave Capitol Hill voluntarily—to retire, to run for another office, or to follow other pursuits. In other words, the natural process of membership change is continuous. Although the vast majority of incumbents seeking reelection won in 2018, the 116th Congress included 88 new House members, one of three largest freshman classes since 1950.125 In January 2019, more than 40 percent of the House and 30 percent of the Senate had served two Congresses or less. For Congress to be a responsive institution, constant turnover of members is essential—whether by steady increments or by watershed elections. Even when few lawmakers are defeated for reelection, all of them are keenly aware of the possibility of losing. Most take steps to prevent that eventuality by continually monitoring constituents’ needs and opinions through personal visits and polls. But are voters’ views accurately reflected by the representatives they elect to Congress? This question is not easily answered. Popular control of policy makers is not the same thing
as popular control of policies. Constituents’ views are not precisely mirrored by legislators’ voting behavior or by the laws passed by the legislature.

CONCLUSION

Are voters’ attitudes linked to members’ voting on issues? In the 1960s, Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes found that constituency attitudes correlated differently depending on the kind of policy. In foreign affairs, constituents’ attitudes and legislators’ votes exhibited a negative correlation; in social and economic welfare issues, the correlation was moderate; in civil rights issues, the correlation was very high. In other words, in at least one and possibly two major policy areas, the linkage was weak enough to cast some doubt on constituency control of elected representatives.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that elections reshape Congress and congressional agendas. Winning candidates learn from their campaign experiences, even from issues raised by their opponents. Issue uptake is the term coined by political scientist Tracy Sulkin to describe this effect. Sulkin’s study shows that House and Senate victors embrace many of their opponents’ campaign themes when they return to Capitol Hill. “Congressional campaigns have a clear legacy in the content of legislators’ agendas,” she writes, “influencing the areas in which they choose to be active and the intensity with which they pursue these activities.”

Legislative responsiveness is best thought of as a process:

It begins in campaigns as candidates learn about the salience of issues and their strengths and weaknesses on them; continues throughout winning legislators’ terms in office, influencing not just how they vote but also the content of legislation they introduce, cosponsor, and speak about on the floor; goes on to inform their career decisions and future electoral prospects; and leaves a tangible trace on public policy outputs.

If ideological or attitudinal links between voters and their representatives are rough and variable, actual contacts between constituents and individual legislators are numerous and palpable. Much of lawmakers’ time and effort while in office is devoted to responding to the folks back home. Constituency politics are ever present in the daily lives of senators and representatives. The two Congresses are distinct but inextricably linked.