THE POLITICS OF CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

FOURTH EDITION

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Elections touch the core of American political life. They provide ritual expression of the myth that makes political authority legitimate: We are governed, albeit indirectly, by our own consent. Elections are also the focus of thoroughly practical politics. They determine who will hold positions of real power in the political system and, by establishing a framework in which power is pursued, profoundly affect the behavior of people holding or seeking power. The mythical and practical components of elections meet at the point where electoral constraints are supposed to make leaders responsive and responsible to the public. How comfortably they fit together has deep consequences for the entire political system. Almost any important development in American political life will be intertwined with the electoral process.

Congressional elections in particular are intimately linked to many basic phenomena of American politics. In countless ways, obvious and subtle, they affect the performance of Congress and, through it, the entire government. At the same time they reflect the changing political landscape, revealing as well as shaping its fundamental contours.

The basic questions to be asked about congressional elections are straightforward: Who gets elected to Congress and how? Why do people vote the way they do in congressional elections? How do electoral politics affect the way Congress works and the kinds of policies it produces? What kind of representation do congressional elections really provide? Every answer has further implications for the workings of American politics; many of them must be traced out in order to grasp the deeper role of congressional elections in the political process.

To explain what goes on in congressional elections and to understand how they are connected in myriad ways to other aspects of American political life are the broad purposes of this book. It also has a more pointed intention: To use a careful

examination of the complex, multifaceted business of electing Congress to help understand why politicians in Washington have found it so difficult to fashion measured solutions to pressing national problems.

A central theme in earlier editions of this book was that political incapacity and stalemate were fostered by an electoral process that gave senators and representatives every reason to be individually responsive but little reason to be collectively responsible. Since the third edition was published, the chickens of collective irresponsibility have come home to roost. First, the 1992 elections brought the highest turnover of House seats in 50 years. Then the 1994 elections put Republicans in control of both Houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years. These elections raised many new questions and opened many new possibilities, and I spend a good deal of time in this edition examining the changes in the electoral politics of Congress observed in the early 1990s and speculating on their durabilty.

Congressional elections are complex events. The sources of this complexity are many. An important one is the number of different perspectives from which congressional elections can be examined. Consider the alternative ways the question, "How's the congressional election going?" might be answered. A candidate or campaign manager would immediately begin talking about what was going on in the district, who was ahead, what groups were supporting which candidate, how much money was coming in, what issues were emerging. A national party leader—the president, for example—would respond in terms of how many seats the party might gain or lose in the House and Senate and what this might mean for the administration's programs. A private citizen might grumble about the hot air, mudslinging, and general perfidy of politicians, or might scarcely be aware that an election was taking place.

Similarly, political scientists and other people who study congressional elections do so from a variety of research orientations. Some study voters: Why do people vote the way they do? Why do they vote at all? Others study candidates and campaigns: Who runs for Congress, and why? What goes on in campaigns? How is money raised and spent—and what difference does it make? Or they explore the aggregate results of congressional elections: What accounts for the changes in the distribution of House and Senate seats between the two parties? Still others are interested in representation: How are the activities of members of Congress, and the performance of Congress as an institution, connected with what goes on in elections? These and other questions are deserving of individual attention. But it is no less essential to understand how they are all interrelated.

People involved in congressional elections are at least implicitly aware of the connections between the different levels of analysis. Voters are interested primarily in the candidates and campaigns in their state or district, but at least some are conscious of the broader political context and may, for example, adapt their congressional voting decision to their feelings about presidential candidates. Presidents worried about the overall makeup of the Congress are by no means indifferent to individual races and sometimes involve themselves in local campaigns. Candidates and other congressional activists are mindful of national as well as local political conditions they believe influence election outcomes; and of course they

spend a great deal of time trying to figure out how to appeal effectively to individual voters.

Scholars, too, are fully aware that, although research strategies dictate that the congressional election terrain be subdivided into workable plots, no aspect of congressional elections can be understood in isolation. It is essential to integrate various streams of investigation for any clear account of what is going on. This is no simple task. One difficulty is quite familiar to students of the social sciences: how to connect the accounts of individual behavior to large-scale social phenomena. The problem is one of coordinating the micro and macro level accounts of political behavior (there are middle levels, too, of course). But it turns out to be a most fruitful problem. Its solution is a rich source of insight into congressional election processes and their consequences.

The approach taken in this book is to examine congressional elections from several perspectives while attending throughout to the interconnections among them. Chapter 2 sets out the legal and institutional context in which congressional elections take place. This formal context is easily taken for granted and overlooked, but it is, on reflection, fundamental. The very existence of congressional elections depends on this structure, and it shapes them in a great many important ways. The chapter also surveys briefly the rich variety of social, economic, and ethnic mixes that are found among states and congressional districts, for this diversity underlies many distinctive aspects of congressional election politics.

The third and fourth chapters examine, respectively, congressional candidates and campaigns. The pervasive effects of incumbency inject a theme common to both of these chapters. The resources, strategies, and tactics of candidates vary sharply, depending on whether a candidate is an incumbent, a challenger to an incumbent, or running for an open seat where neither candidate is an incumbent. They also differ between House and Senate candidates in each of these categories. The strategies of candidates in different electoral situations and the consequences of varying strategies are explored. So are the roles of campaign money, organization, campaign activities and tactics, and the local political context. Campaigns both reflect and work to reinforce candidates' assumptions about the electorate, and they are also closely linked to the behavior in office of those elected.

Chapter 5 deals with voting in congressional elections. Knowing who votes and what influences the voting decision are valuable pieces of information in their own right, but such knowledge is even more important as a means for understanding what congressional elections mean, what they can and cannot accomplish. The way voters react is tied closely to the behavior of candidates and the design and operation of campaigns—and to what members of Congress do in office.

Chapter 6 looks upon congressional elections as aggregate phenomena. When all the individual contests are summed up over an election year, the collective outcome determines which party controls the Congress and with how large a majority. It also strongly influences the kinds of national policies that emerge; it is at this level that the government is or is not held responsible. Congressional elections clearly respond to aggregate political conditions. But aggregate outcomes are no

more than the summation of individual voting decisions in the districts to election results across all districts. The path that leads from aggregate political conditions to individual voting decisions to aggregate congressional election outcomes is surprisingly complicated; candidates' strategies turn out to provide a critical connecting link. The points in this chapter are illustrated by a brief reviews of each biennial election from 1980 to 1990, with more detailed accounts of the crucial 1992 and 1994 elections.

Finally, of course, congressional elections are important for how they influence the behavior of elected leaders and therefore the success or failure of politics. In fact, the knowledge that they are elected officials is the key to understanding why members of Congress do what they do in office. Not only *that* they are elected, but *how* they are elected matters. How candidates mount campaigns and how voters choose among them has a crucial effect on what members of Congress do with their time and other resources and with the quality, quantity, and direction of their legislative work. Electoral necessities enhance or restrict in predictable ways the influence of individuals, groups, parties, congressional leaders, and presidents. And all of these things affect the performance of Congress as a policy-making institution. These arguments are developed in Chapter 7.

The final chapter assesses Congress as a representative institution. It argues that the evolution of electoral politics during the postwar era produced a system that encouraged individual responsiveness but collective irresponsibility, weakening government's capacity to deal effectively with pressing national problems. Members of Congress avoided collective punishment for government's failures until divided partisan control of the government ended with the 1992 elections. The Democrats' victory exposed them to the full force of popular wrath in 1994, costing them majority control of both houses. The chapter concludes with speculation about the durability of the Republicans' current experiment in party responsibility and the Democrats' prospect of making a comeback in 1996 or during the rest of the century.