The Not-So-Simple Calculus of Winning: Potential U.S. House Candidates’ Nomination and General Election Prospects

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As the individual qualities of potential House candidates improve, their prospects in both the nomination and general election go up. The same is not true, however, for two key characteristics of the district context in which potential candidates might run: the party of the potential candidate in relation to the incumbent and the partisan makeup of the district. The direction of the effects of both incumbency and district partisanship on prospects, in contrast to the effects of quality, depends upon the stage of the election process. Using a survey of district informants in a random sample of House districts, we find that incumbent and potential-candidate quality both affect potential candidates’ prospects of winning, with “strategic qualities” generally having a stronger direct effect than “personal qualities.” District partisanship has offsetting and strong effects on potential candidates’ chances in both stages: Nomination prospects decline as the partisan makeup of the district favors the potential candidate, while general election chances increase as district partisanship becomes more favorable. An expected parabolic relationship between chances of winning the seat and district partisanship clearly emerges in the analysis. These effects are fundamental to our understanding of the sources of competition in U.S. House elections.

Potential candidates for high office think seriously about their chances of winning before they run. The better their chances of winning, the more likely they are to run. This proposition is central to the literature on strategic politicians and political ambition (Black 1972; Brace 1984; Jacobson 1980, 1989, 1996; Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Rohde 1979). The literature on strategic politicians tends to focus on national conditions that structure opportunity for potential House candidates: When conditions are favorable for a party, relatively high-quality potential candidates come forward to run; when national conditions are not favorable, such candidates hold back because their chances of winning are diminished.

The literature on the incumbency effect in U.S. House elections arrives at similar conclusions about the importance of winning for potential candidates, although it focuses on the importance of local conditions—especially incumbency—that deter strong potential challengers from running. The explanation is...
widely accepted: Incumbents have an enormous advantage over most challengers in visibility and popularity that they cultivate through the use of the perquisites and powers of their office (Abramowitz 1975; Cover and Brumberg 1982; Fiorina 1977; Herrnson 1998; Mann and Wolfinger 1980; Mayhew 1974). Potential challengers presumably are aware of the incumbent’s advantages and are most likely to run when the seat becomes open (Bond, Covington, and Fleisher 1985; Fowler 1993; Fowler and McClure 1989; Gaddie and Bullock 2000; Kazee 1983). Because incumbents have staff subsidies and the frank and can distribute benefits to their constituencies, they may not be vulnerable to challenge, even by those who might be substantially stronger candidates and better Representatives if they could challenge the incumbent in a fair contest. The incumbent-deterrence effect, therefore, is seen as severely distorting the process of electoral competition and representation.

Our purpose is to reexamine the question of potential candidate (PC) chances of winning a seat for the U.S. House of Representatives. We agree that PCs’ chances of winning are likely to play heavily in their decisions about whether to run (Maisel and Stone 1997). Indeed, it is precisely the importance of potential candidates’ chances that motivates us to reexamine the question. We begin with an observation that, while obvious, is often ignored in analyses of candidates’ prospects: Winning a House seat involves winning two distinct elections. In order to win the seat, the potential candidate first must win the nomination or primary stage, followed by the general election. The chances of winning the nomination are defined as the probability of winning if the individual decides to run. We define a potential candidate’s chances of winning the general election as the probability of winning if the individual wins his or her party’s nomination. Both, therefore, are conditional probabilities, and the chances of winning the seat are computed by multiplying the probability of winning the nomination times the probability of winning the general election. Three conclusions follow from recognizing this simple fact: (1) The probability of winning the seat will almost always be lower than the conditional probability of winning the nomination or the general election;1 (2) A strong chance of winning the nomination can be offset by a weak chance of winning the general election, and vice versa; and (3) The chances of winning each of the two stages of the process are formally independent, although of course, the probability of winning the seat is the joint conditional probability of winning both stages.

The formal independence of PC chances in the two stages does not address the question of how other variables relate to them empirically. Our argument is that in understanding these relationships the “not-so-simple” character of potential candidates’ chances emerges. In the first place, there are clearly factors that tend to push nomination and general election chances in tandem. Characteristics that define the quality of the potential candidates themselves are an obvious example. Across a set of potential candidates whose name recognition in their districts vary,

1The exceptions occur when one or both probabilities take on extreme values of 0 or 1.0.
those with greater visibility should, ceteris paribus, have higher chances of winning both the nomination and the general election stages. The same could be said for other attributes, such as fundraising ability, personal integrity, experience, and most other personal characteristics that can be considered resources when an individual runs for public office.

Are these sorts of variables enough to lead us to expect a consistent positive relationship between potential candidates’ nomination and general election chances? We think not, because of how context may differentially affect chances in the two stages. One example of a “contextual” effect of this sort is incumbency. Potential candidates thinking about running for a House seat in which an incumbent is running for reelection must consider in which stage of the election they will face the incumbent. Potential candidates in the same party as the Representative must face the incumbent in the primary; those in the opposite party face the Member of Congress in the general election. Those who are in the same party as the incumbent typically face a more daunting task in winning their party’s nomination than those who are in the opposite party. In the general election, the situation is reversed, with the out-party candidate disadvantaged by having to face the incumbent.

However, whether a potential candidate is in the incumbent’s party involves more than his or her relationship to the incumbent. Because House districts that are dominated by one party tend to elect incumbents from that party, being in the district majority usually also means that one is in the incumbent’s party. District partisanship should have offsetting relationships to a potential candidate’s nomination and general election chances. In fact, because it is easy to confuse the two, it is important to separate as best we can the effects of district partisanship from incumbency (Alford and Brady 1993; Campbell 1997; Gelman and King 1990; Kostroski 1973). Since most incumbents share the partisanship of their district’s majority, the natural predisposition of most voters in the typical district is to vote for the incumbent over the opposition party’s nominee. It is possible, therefore, that the favorable partisan makeup of the typical incumbent’s district, rather than anything they do as officeholders, accounts for their high reelection rates. Setting incumbency aside for the moment, the relationships we expect between district partisanship and potential-candidate chances are illustrated in Figure 1.

General election chances for a potential candidate should improve as district partisanship is more favorable to the potential candidate. The reason is obvious: as the distribution of party identification increasingly favors the potential candidate so also does the tendency of the district to vote for the potential candidate, or any potential candidate of the same political party, as long as the nomination is in hand. Naturally, some PCs in the majority party have better prospects than others due to their greater skill or other personal attributes, but all potential candidates enjoy stronger general election chances as district partisanship is increasingly in their favor.

Much as being in the dominant party aids the potential candidate in the general election, being in the district majority party should reduce potential candidates’
chances of winning their party’s nomination. The relationship is negative because a party’s nomination increases in value with more favorable district partisanship. As the nomination becomes more valuable, competition from other potential candidates goes up, and the chances that any particular PC will win go down. This relationship is clearly demonstrated in V.O. Key’s work:

If the Republicans usually attract a small vote in a jurisdiction, their primary nomination tends to go to an unopposed aspirant who has taken the trouble to get his name on the ballot. As the usual size of the Republican vote increases, primary contests occur more frequently (Key 1964, 416).

Whether the negative effect of district partisanship on nomination chances precisely offsets its positive effect on general election chances, as we have constructed Figure 1, is debatable but we are confident that the probabilities

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2 Key reports data on Senate and House primaries showing monotonic relationships between contested primaries and partisan vote division in both political parties (Key 1964, 478, 488). See also Standing and Robinson (1958) for a similar argument and results.
associated with the two stages run in opposite directions. So long as this assumption is correct, the probability of winning the seat will exhibit a parabolic relationship with district partisanship, more or less as represented in Figure 1. In this illustration, the inflection point on the “seat” curve is exactly in the middle of the district partisanship scale because we portray the negative effects of district partisanship on nomination chances as symmetric with its effect on general election chances. With this assumption, the predicted high point of potential candidates’ chances of winning their seat is in districts that are most balanced in their district partisanship. Districts where the partisan balance is most in the potential candidates’ favor offer high chances of winning the general election, but a very difficult hurdle in winning the nomination. As a result of the low nomination chances, the overall chances of winning the seat are low. Likewise, districts where the partisan balance is strongly against the potential candidate offer high chances of winning the party nomination, which is offset by poor chances of winning the general election.³ As a result, these districts present a relatively low chance of winning the seat. The best opportunity is found in districts that maximize the offsetting chances of winning, not in districts where the chances of winning one stage of the process are highest.

Our argument here is about the effects of district partisanship as distinct from incumbency. Therefore, our expectation is that the effects represented in Figure 1 hold whether or not the potential candidate is in the party of the incumbent. In districts with a dominant party, the effect of district partisanship may be mistaken for incumbent deterrence. But both incumbency and district partisanship are typically at work. Our task is to distinguish among the variables that affect potential candidates’ chances of victory in the two stages and therefore their chances of winning the seat.

Unfortunately, yet another confounding variable muddles our ability to distinguish the effects of these contextual variables. The quality of the incumbent as a candidate may result from the tendency of the electoral process to select the strongest candidates (Erikson 1971; Mondak 1995; Zaller 1998). As Zaller puts it in his critique of the incumbency literature,

> My argument, then, is that strong challengers emerge in congressional politics whenever they see an opportunity to win, that when they do they are able to command the resources necessary to mount serious fights, and that, in consequence, incumbent MCs, like incumbent boxing champions, cannot survive in office much longer than their personal skills warrant. (Zaller 1998, 153)

Of course, the net result of a system that selects high-quality candidates as office holders would be that incumbents usually win, and strong potential candidates

³ In one of the few papers that explicitly incorporates nomination chances in a model of potential candidate behavior, Banks and Kiewiet suggest that relatively weak potential candidates in the party opposite the incumbent’s may be motivated to seek their party’s nomination because their overall chances of winning are higher than when the incumbent is not running and they must face stiff competition from strong potential candidates for their party’s nomination (Banks and Kiewiet 1989).
would normally be deterred from testing their skills against those of the reigning “champion.”

Mondak (1995) addressed incumbent quality in a creative study of incumbent House members’ competence and integrity, as measured by published assessments of their performance in office. Mondak’s study makes two important contributions to the study of candidate quality in elections: First, he applies the notion of quality to incumbents, recognizing that incumbents’ electoral prospects may turn on their quality, rather than treating them as an undifferentiated (and unbeatable) class of candidates. Second, he expands the concept of candidate quality explicitly beyond purely strategic qualities to include characteristics of candidates and incumbents more in keeping with what ordinary citizens are likely to think about quality in officeholders and candidates. He finds that incumbent quality helps explain Representatives’ electoral success and that as incumbent quality decreases, the likelihood of a significant challenge increases.

The explanations we have enumerated—in incumbency, district partisanship, and candidate quality—are not mutually exclusive. It could be that elections act as filters selecting the most skilled politicians, that skilled politicians in the majority party have an advantage over equally able candidates in the minority, and that once in office, talented politicians maintain their electoral strength by manipulating the resources of their office. Distinguishing among these effects would be difficult enough with the best of measures, but it is impossible without measures of all relevant concepts. Some studies have attempted to gauge the quality of incumbents and to assess the results of incumbent activity (Alvarez and Saving 1997; Cover and Brumberg 1982; Fiorina 1981; Levitt and Snyder 1997; McAdams and Johannes 1981; McCurley and Mondak 1995; Mondak 1995; Stein and Bickers 1994). However, no one to our knowledge has incorporated measures of incumbent quality, district partisanship, and challenger quality in the same design that takes account of both the nomination and general election stages. As a result the evidence is ambiguous, open to several interpretations.

Design of the Candidate Emergence Study

Our approach to the study of candidate chances is markedly different from that of prior research on the problem. Rohde, in his seminal article on the ambition of U.S. House members for higher office, makes the distinction between “prospective” studies of political ambition, which consider the opportunity to run as the operative question, and “retrospective” studies, which employ data on whether or not individuals run, how well they do, and what their qualities are, after the behavior has occurred (Rohde 1979, 3). A prospective analysis is necessary if the question is who does not run, as well as who does.

In addition, because we see potential candidates’ chances of winning as critical to their decision-making process, we adopted a prospective approach to studying PCs’ chances of winning. In this, our study is unique. Of course, taking a prospective approach means that perceptions of chances of winning in advance
of decisions about running is the relevant factor, rather than a post-election measure of the actual outcome. An outcome-based measure is especially inappropriate when the focus is on potential candidates who do not run. The problem, of course, is how to measure potential candidates’ electoral prospects in advance of an election in which they might run.

The Candidate Emergence Study is designed to capture prospective perceptions of potential candidates’ chances of winning both the nomination and general election stages, which allows a much richer analysis of PC chances, along with measures of the district context, and incumbent and potential-candidate quality. This article is based on a survey of informants in 200 randomly selected congressional districts. In addition to identifying strong potential candidates in their districts, we asked informants for information about their district, the incumbent, and the potential candidates whom they identified. Informant-generated indicators of these variables give us leverage on the three explanations of potential candidates’ chances: incumbent quality, district partisanship, and potential-candidate quality. Self-generated assessments of potential-candidate quality are obviously biased in a way that informants’ assessments are not.4

Our goal was to select 10 Democratic and 10 Republican political activists from each district; we also selected one political scientist with expertise in American politics from each district.5 We drew most heavily from two sources in identifying our informants: 1996 Democratic and Republican national convention delegates and county chairs. In districts in which insufficient numbers of informants from these two sources were identified, we supplemented our sample by including 1992 convention delegates. The survey was administered in the summer of 1997.

We asked each respondent to identify up to four individuals whom the respondent judged would be potentially strong candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives. We encouraged informants to think broadly about who such potentially strong candidates might be, in either party, whether or not the individuals had ever expressed an interest in making such a race, and whether or not others had mentioned them as potential candidates. We received a response rate of 43% of our target sample.6 These informants provided us with 1399 usable names and addresses of unique potential candidates in 192 of our sample districts.7 On average, informants recommended just over seven unique candidates per district.

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4Another advantage of using the informant survey is that the number of informant-potential candidate observations is much higher than in the potential candidate survey because informant-based analysis does not depend on locating and securing responses from potential candidates.

5In the pretest we experimented with using journalists as informants, but response rates were unsatisfactory.

6Our procedure was to mail a letter explaining the study, followed by a questionnaire, and a reminder postcard. Those who did not respond were mailed a second questionnaire.

7Sixty percent of all informants identified at least one potential candidate. The average number of potential candidates identified was just over two, among informants who named at least one PC. About 30% of the usable potential candidates were identified by more than one informant.
Reliability and Validity of Informant Perceptions

Our approach was to ask informants for independent judgments about characteristics or qualities of districts, incumbents, and potential candidates and then to use these measures in the models we construct. For example, we asked informants for ratings of their incumbent, for their judgment about the makeup of their district, and their perceptions of the chances the potential candidates whom they named had of winning. We did not ask informants to tell us what they saw as the relationship between district characteristics and potential candidates' chances. We test hypotheses about that and other relationships of interest by examining the relationships between and among the relevant variables.

Obviously, this approach can work only if informants’ perceptions provide reliable and valid measures of the characteristics in question. Survey researchers commonly rely upon respondents as informants about their own characteristics, such as their party identification, issue opinions, or voting behavior. We know that these estimates are sometimes subject to bias or distortion of one kind or another, but they are often the best or only measures available. We believe that using respondents as informants about salient aspects of their political environment, especially when the respondents are themselves actively engaged and well informed about that environment, is a legitimate and underutilized research strategy in the social sciences. But it is incumbent upon us to consider the reliability and validity of the approach.

We have followed standard practice and computed reliability coefficients (Cronbach’s Alpha) on items used to construct candidate quality indices (Table 1 lists the items included in the indices; reliability analysis is not reported). All of these results are reassuring. For example, the Alphas for the informant sample are .69 for incumbents’ strategic resources index, .90 for the personal qualities index, and .84 for the performance index.8

Because we have two independent samples of “informants” in every district (informants and potential candidates themselves) who were asked many of the same perceptual questions about characteristics of their districts and of the incumbent, we can assess the reliability of these judgments between the two samples. We asked both samples about five characteristics of their districts: strength of Democratic and Republican party organizations, the ideological positions of all voters in the district and of Democratic and Republican primary voters, and the state of the district economy. The mean intersample reliability across all five items is .77. The intersample reliability of incumbent characteristics depends on the items. On relatively “easy” items such as incumbent ideology, reliability is a very high .95. On incumbent qualities such as integrity and grasp of the issues that

8 These reliabilities are computed on district mean estimates of incumbent quality. At the individual level, the reliabilities are as follows: Incumbent strategic resources .67; incumbent personal qualities .89; incumbent performance .84; PC strategic resources .74; PC personal qualities .88. The item content of these indexes is discussed below in the context of presenting our findings.
are much more difficult to observe, intersample reliabilities average .54. The correlations on these incumbent-quality items are lower than we would like, but they are all clearly and significantly positive. Moreover, they are consistent with those reported by Mondak in the only other systematic quantitative study of incumbent quality of which we are aware (Mondak 1995).

Validity checks are more difficult because we need measures of the relevant concepts that are based on measures independent of respondent perceptions. On most measures no such items are available. However, on several items we do have separate measures, although it is at times doubtful whether the nonperceptual measure is as good as our respondents’ judgments. But if the question is whether informants and potential candidates can be trusted as judges at all, looking at the available data is interesting. Perhaps the best case of an external measure of a concept that we also measured using informants’ perceptions is the liberalism of the incumbent. We have ADA scores computed from Representatives’ roll-call voting behavior that we can compare with placements by informants of their incumbent on a seven-point liberal-conservative scale. On this comparison, the evidence is very reassuring: the Pearson’s $r$ correlation between informants’ ideological placement of incumbents and the same Representatives’ ADA scores is a resounding .90.

We also asked about the partisan and ideological makeup of voters in the district. We lack as good a measure of the ideology of the district as we have of the incumbent, so we have compared informants’ perceptions of district ideology with the percent in the district voting for Bill Clinton in the 1996 election. We use the same criterion variable to assess the validity of potential candidates’ perceptions of district partisanship. In both the district partisanship and ideology measures, respondents placed the district on seven-point scales, and we aggregated these perceptions to the district level to compute the correlation with district vote for Clinton. The correlation between district partisanship and vote for Clinton is .71; between district ideology and vote for Clinton it is .76.

Overall, these results support the validity of our strategy of relying on district informants to measure concepts that otherwise would not be observable. While no method is perfect, the questions our design allows us to address are of sufficient interest to warrant a new approach. Due caution is called for in interpreting our results, but we believe the evidence in favor of our design is strong.

Findings

**Ratings of Incumbent and Potential-Candidate Quality**

We asked informants to use seven-point scales ranging from “Extremely Weak” ($-3$) through “Extremely Strong” ($+3$) to rate the incumbent in their district and

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9 This item was included only on the potential candidate survey, so we use the PC sample as informants to measure the partisanship of the districts included in the study.
the potential candidates they named on items designed to capture aspects of candidate quality. For the most part, the same items were asked about incumbents and potential candidates. Table 1 presents these mean ratings on three clusters of items, identified as “strategic qualities,” “personal qualities,” and “incumbent performance items.” Strategic and personal qualities are aspects of candidate quality that apply equally to incumbents and potential candidates, while performance items were asked only about incumbents. The summary index for each cluster is composed only of the items asked about both incumbents and potential candidates. Informants’ raw ratings exhibit a significant partisan bias in perceptions, especially on the personal qualities, such that informants tend to rate incumbents and potential candidates in their own party higher than they rate incumbents or potential candidates in the opposite party. We correct for this bias by statistically adjusting the evaluations in the means reported in Table 1.

Notice first that informants rate incumbents substantially higher than potential challengers on the strategic qualities we asked about: name recognition, ability to raise money, and support from the individual’s party outside the district. All of these differences are statistically significant and reflect an awareness of the substantial advantages incumbents enjoy. On both name recognition and ability to raise money, incumbents appear to have an especially large advantage over potential candidates. The strategic-quality index reflects the substantial edge that incumbents have over potential candidates in the minds of our respondents. The low rating of potential candidates’ ability to fund their own campaigns (a question not asked in the incumbent battery) suggests that informants did not select potential candidates primarily because of their personal wealth.

On the personal-quality items, a different picture emerges, as potential candidates’ ratings appear to exceed those of incumbents. We do not necessarily conclude from their higher ratings on personal qualities that potential candidates in fact have a greater dedication to serving the public, ability to work with other political leaders, integrity, and the rest. A consequence of our design is that informants rated potential candidates whom they selected. Thus, although we can purge scores of partisan bias, it is not possible to correct for possible selection bias.

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10 The clusters of items were partially identified by a principal components factor analysis that distinguished between strategic and personal qualities for both potential candidates and incumbents. The incumbent performance items loaded with the personal quality questions, but we have separated them in Table 1 in order to preserve comparability between incumbent and potential candidate ratings. Substantive results reported below do not differ when we substitute incumbent performance for personal quality in our incumbent quality analysis. If we include both personal and performance measures, personal quality dominates.

11 The adjustment procedure involves regressing the evaluation on partisanship: \( \hat{Y} = a + b_1 (\text{Informant Partyid}) \). Informant party identification is coded so that \(-1 =\) informant and incumbent/PC are in opposite parties; \(+1 =\) informant and target are in the same parties. The intercept represents the expected rating for an informant who is indifferent in partisanship.

12 The potential candidates’ ratings of incumbents are very similar to informants. Potential candidates see themselves at an even larger disadvantage on strategic resources than informants do primarily because PCs rate their own resources lower than informants do.
bias built into the design. It is plausible to conclude, however, that while potential candidates are behind incumbents in strategic resources, they are at least on a par with incumbents in their personal qualities. Informants hold both incumbents and potential candidates in high regard, as the ratings tend to be strongly positive across the items in our batteries. In any event, as will become clear, our primary focus is on the effects of variation in potential-candidate and incumbent quality rather than on comparing point estimates of incumbent and potential challenger quality.

Evaluations of incumbents’ performance as Representatives reflect a clear impression by informants that incumbents do a much better job of providing constituency services and in staying in touch with the district than they do with the more overtly legislative side of their job. They are less successful at bringing home the bacon, and informants are least impressed with incumbents’ legislative accomplishments in the House. These rankings seem consistent with theories

### TABLE 1
Mean Quality Ratings of Incumbents and Potential Candidates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants’ Ratings of:</th>
<th>Incumbentsa</th>
<th>Potential Candidatesa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategic Qualities:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name recognition in the district</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to raise money to fund campaign</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from party outside district</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to fund campaign with his/her own money</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>−.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategic quality indexb</strong></td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Qualities:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication to serving the public</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grasp of the issues</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to find solutions to problems</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public speaking ability</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to work with other political leaders</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal integrity</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal quality indexb</strong></td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Incumbent Performance Items:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative accomplishments in the House</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to bring federal funds to district</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to provide constituency services</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to stay in touch with the district</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Incumbent performance index</strong></td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smallest N</td>
<td>1266</td>
<td>1988</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Mean estimates are statistically adjusted to remove effects of informant partisan bias (see note 11).
b Items used in quality indexes were identical for incumbents and potential candidates.

Source: Authors’ Candidate Emergence Study surveys; based on districts in which incumbents were running for reelection in 1998.
such as Mayhew’s (1974) that suggest incumbents have more success servicing their constituencies than they do advancing a broader legislative agenda.

**Incumbent and Potential-Candidate Electoral Prospects**

We asked informants to rate their incumbent’s chances of winning their party’s nomination in 1998 if they chose to run and their chances of winning the general election if they won the nomination. We also asked for identical judgments about the potential candidates whom they named: the chances that the PC would win the nomination if he/she chose to run in 1998, and the chances that the PC would win the general election if he/she won the nomination. These judgments about electoral prospects are on seven-point scales, ranging from “Extremely Unlikely” through “Toss Up” to “Extremely Likely.” We have scored the items on seven-point scales to conform to subjective probability scales to make the results easily interpretable. We have coded the item extremes .01 (“Extremely Unlikely”) and .99 (“Extremely Likely”), and the midpoint .50 (“Toss Up”). The two categories on either side of .50 are equidistant between the extreme and the mid-point. The coding we have adopted is inevitably a rough approximation of the underlying subjective probabilities that we are attempting to measure. It has the virtue of producing data that are readily interpretable and consistent with the verbal cues we gave respondents in the question wording. However, caution must be exercised when interpreting the results. In order to distinguish between the theoretical probabilities of interest and these subjective “pseudo-probabilities,” we refer to them as “electoral prospects” or “chances.” They are not estimates of the probabilities of the events described in our questions, but they can capture relative differences in the subjective prospects of incumbents and potential candidates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean* Informant Perceptions of:</th>
<th>Prospects of Winning Seat</th>
<th>Nomination Prospects</th>
<th>General Election Prospects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent (N = 1359)</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Candidate in Same Party as Incumbent (N = 799)</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Candidate in Party Opposite Incumbent (N = 1035)</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Districts in which incumbents were running for reelection in 1998.

*Means corrected for informant partisan bias.
Informants’ perceptions of the prospects that an incumbent or potential candidate will win the seat are computed as follows:13

\[ \bar{X}_{P_i(w_j)} = \frac{\sum[P_i(N_j|R_j) \times P_i(E_j|N_j)]}{n_{ij}} \]

Where,

- \( P_i \) = Subjective prospects estimate by the \( i \)th informant;
- \( W_j \) = \( j \)th incumbent or potential candidate wins the seat;
- \( N_j \) = Nomination by the \( j \)th incumbent or potential candidate;
- \( R_j \) = \( j \)th incumbent or potential candidate runs;
- \( E_j \) = Election of the \( j \)th incumbent or potential candidate;
- \( n_{ij} \) = Number of cases.14

Based on incumbents’ strategic advantages, it is no surprise to see in Table 2 that informants perceive incumbents as having much stronger prospects than potential candidates to win the seat if they choose to run (first column of Table 2). The mean subjective probability of the incumbent winning the seat is .81, while the mean prospects for in- and out-party potential candidates are between .26 and .30. These estimates indicate that the incumbents enjoy about a 3:1 advantage over the average strong potential candidate in perceived chances of winning the seat.

Again, we caution that care should be taken in interpreting these results. The expectation that strong potential candidates, if they were to run, would have a little better than a 1-in-4 chance of unseating the incumbent may seem high when compared with the much lower success rates challengers typically enjoy. However, it is important to keep in mind that the vast majority of strong potential candidates named by our informants did not run in 1998.15 Indeed, that is the

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13 The conditional nature of prospects were operationalized in the questions as follows: “Please give your best estimate of how likely each of the following is: The incumbent U.S. Representative in your district [this potential candidate] will win the primary election in 1998 if he/she runs.” And, “The incumbent U.S. Representative [this potential candidate] will win the general election in 1998, if he/she wins the primary.”

14 The number of cases for the incumbent analysis is equal to the number of informants, since each informant rated only one incumbent. The number of cases for the potential candidate analysis is equal to the number of informants \( X \) the number of PCs rated. Sixty percent of informants named at least one potential candidate; the average number of PCs rated by each informant who named a potential candidate was just over two.

15 Only 8% of the potential candidate-informant pairings resulted in the potential candidate actually running for the House in 1998. The ability of informants to predict whether potential candidates would run was quite good. The gamma correlation between informants’ estimates of the chances the potential candidate would run and whether the PC actually ran is .79. Forty-two percent of those judged “extremely likely” to run actually ran, while only 1% of potential candidates judged by informants as unlikely to run in 1998 actually ran.
point of our larger study: We seek a better understanding of the strong potential candidates who do not run and who, if they were to enter the race, would presumably have better than average prospects of beating the incumbent. Informant judgments about potential candidates’ prospects are conditioned on the PCs deciding to run, although in fact the overwhelming majority of PCs named by informants decided against running in 1998.16

Our expectation that potential candidates’ nomination and general election prospects depend on whether the PC is in the incumbent’s party is supported in the data. Informants judge potential candidates’ nomination prospects to be twice as high for out-party potential candidates (.67) as for those who share the party identification of the incumbent (.32). Conversely, informants see out-party potential candidate chances of winning the general election as substantially weaker (.42) than in-party potential candidates (.65). The results of combining these offsetting nomination and general election chances for in- and out-party potential candidates are the roughly equal prospects of winning the seat for potential candidates of either the incumbent’s or the opposition party.

The Effects of District Partisanship

The offsetting pattern of potential candidates’ nomination and general election chances is consistent with our expectations about the influence of incumbency on potential challenger’s prospects. Incumbency dampens in-party potential candidates’ nomination chances because, were they to run, they would face the daunting task of wresting their party’s nomination from a sitting Representative. Out-party potential candidates, in contrast, would have a relatively easy time winning their party’s nomination, only to face the incumbent in the general election. Because incumbents are difficult to unseat in the general election, an out-party PC who sought the nomination would likely face little serious competition in that stage, but would have poor prospects in the general election.

The problem with this interpretation of the results in Table 2 is that it does not take into account the partisan makeup of the district. Indeed, we expect district partisanship to work in much the same way as incumbency, which makes it difficult to determine whether the offsetting effects of incumbency in Table 2 are due to the advantages of the incumbent per se or to the underlying partisan makeup of the district. For example, the fact that in-party PC nomination prospects are low could be due to the difficulty of beating an incumbent for his party’s nomination, or it could be due to the fact that the district majority party’s House nomination is more valuable than the minority’s nomination, and hence

16 It may also be tempting to think of incumbents’ chances of winning the seat as equal to 1-PC’s chances, since incumbents ran for reelection in all of the districts included in Table 2. However, because the chances are conditioned on the PC and the incumbent running, one is not the inverse of the other. To arrive at the incumbent’s chances as (1-PC’s chances) we would have had to ask, “How likely is the incumbent to win the general election if she wins her primary and [name of PC] is the candidate from the opposing party?”
would attract more competition. While it is perhaps most plausible to assign the low nomination prospects of in-party potential candidates to incumbent deter-
rence, it does not make as much sense to assign the potential candidate’s high general election prospects to incumbency. In-party general election prospects are most likely to be high because districts with a strong partisan majority elect individuals (whether they are potential candidates or incumbents) who share the dominant party identification.17

We begin by examining the bivariate relationships between district partisanship and potential candidates’ prospects. Consistent with our expectations, Figure 2 shows that potential candidates’ nomination prospects are negatively associated with district partisanship, while general election prospects are positively associated with dominant-district party identification.18 The crossing or off-setting

17 In our sample districts, the correlation between district partisanship and the partisanship of the incumbent is .68. In districts rated as strongly Republican, only 4% are represented by a Democratic incumbent, whereas 94% of districts rated strongly Democratic are represented by a Democratic incumbent.

18 Correlations reported in Figures 2 and 3 are computed on individual-level data.
pattern in the two stages is consistent with the theoretical expectations suggested in Figure 1. Moreover, the expected parabolic relationship between district partisanship and potential candidates’ chances of winning the seat appears in the data. A potential candidate’s best prospects for winning the seat are in districts where the combined chances of winning the two stages are highest—in districts relatively equally balanced in partisanship, rather than in districts dominated by one party or the other.

**The Effects of Candidate Qualities**

In contrast to the effects of incumbency and district partisanship, characteristics of individual potential candidates should positively affect a potential candidate’s prospects in both the nomination and general election stages. There is no reason why greater strategic resources such as name recognition and the ability to raise money should help a PC in one stage of the election and hurt in the other. Likewise, personal qualities should be desirable in both arenas and therefore enhance both nomination and general election prospects as they increase. Of
course, if both nomination and general election prospects climb with increases in strategic and personal qualities, prospects of winning the seat also go up.

Figures 3a and 3b demonstrate that the expected positive relationships emerge for both strategic and personal qualities. As informants’ judgments of potential candidates’ strategic qualities increase, the mean estimates of their prospects in both stages and of winning the seat also increase. All three bivariate correlations on the ungrouped data are positive and highly significant. The effects of personal qualities on informants’ perceptions of candidate chances are also positive, although they tend to be somewhat weaker than the effects of strategic resources. Despite the weaker correlations, it is reassuring that informants see potential candidates high on the sorts of personal qualities captured by questions on this dimension as having stronger chances of winning, should they decide to run.19

19 When we carry out the analysis in Figures 2 and 3 using the individual items in the strategic and personal indexes, the patterns of positive correlations are replicated. All individual items correlate positively and significantly with all three prospects measured.
Assessing the Effects of District Context and Candidate Quality

So far we have been concerned only with describing the effects on potential candidates’ nomination and general election chances one variable at a time. We have three explanations in play:

1) **Incumbent deterrence**: Incumbents depress potential candidates’ electoral prospects because of the advantages of their office. Being in the party of the incumbent hurts a potential candidate’s nomination prospects; being in the opposite party of the incumbent reduces the PC’s general election prospects. *

2) **District partisanship**: When district partisanship favors potential candidates, general election chances improve, but their prospects of winning their party’s primary go down. Potential candidates’ overall prospects of winning are best in balanced districts, which maximize the combined chances in both the nomination and general election stages. District partisanship may explain much of what looks like incumbent deterrence because majority districts tend to elect incumbents in the dominant party. Thus, district partisanship is exogenous to incumbency and must be taken into account in any assessment of incumbency.

3) **Potential candidate and incumbent quality**: This explanation emphasizes the importance of candidate quality, including the quality of the incumbent. Potential-candidate quality, unlike incumbency and district partisanship, has positive effects on both nomination and general election prospects. In this view, incumbent quality deters strong potential candidates in the same way that any quality competition hurts a potential candidate’s prospects. Elections work to select the highest quality candidates, so on average incumbents are of high quality.

Our task is to incorporate measures of all three explanations as fully as we can into our analysis of potential candidates’ prospects. Table 3 analyzes nomination and general election prospects and the prospects of winning the seat. We begin with district partisanship, which is coded on a seven-point scale from most unfavorable to the potential candidate, through most favorable to the potential candidate. The baseline analysis (Equations 1, 3, and 5) allows us to observe the effects of district partisanship independent of incumbent and potential-candidate quality. The effects of district partisanship on nomination and general election prospects are strong, statistically significant, and in the expected direction. That is, as district partisanship increasingly favors the potential candidate, nomination prospects drop sharply, while general election prospects increase.

The significant quadratic term in Equation 5 confirms the expectation of a parabolic relationship between district partisanship and potential candidates’ prospects of winning the seat. Figure 4 presents the estimated partial effects of

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20 We report robust standard errors clustered by district because observations within districts may not be independent.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Context:</th>
<th>Nomination Prospects</th>
<th>General Election Prospects</th>
<th>Prospects of Winning Seat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District partisanship</td>
<td>$-0.072^{***}$</td>
<td>$-0.017^{**}$</td>
<td>$0.070^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$(0.008)$</td>
<td>$(0.008)$</td>
<td>$(0.006)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District partisanship squared</td>
<td>$-0.006^{**}$</td>
<td>$-0.006^{**}$</td>
<td>$-0.006^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party of the incumbent relative to the potential candidate</td>
<td>$-0.304^{***}$</td>
<td>$-0.304^{***}$</td>
<td>$-0.171^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Candidate Quality:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC strategic quality</td>
<td>$0.083^{***}$</td>
<td>$0.081^{***}$</td>
<td>$0.073^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$(0.008)$</td>
<td>$(0.008)$</td>
<td>$(0.007)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC personal quality</td>
<td>$0.019^{*}$</td>
<td>$0.023^{**}$</td>
<td>$0.039^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$(0.010)$</td>
<td>$(0.009)$</td>
<td>$(0.010)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Quality:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent strategic quality</td>
<td>$-0.021^{**}$</td>
<td>$-0.043^{***}$</td>
<td>$-0.052^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$(0.010)$</td>
<td>$(0.010)$</td>
<td>$(0.011)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent personal quality</td>
<td>$-0.044^{***}$</td>
<td>$-0.016^{**}$</td>
<td>$-0.027^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$(0.008)$</td>
<td>$(0.008)$</td>
<td>$(0.007)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informant bias:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informant and PC in same party</td>
<td>$-0.043^{*}$</td>
<td>$-0.032^{***}$</td>
<td>$0.029^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$(0.014)$</td>
<td>$(0.012)$</td>
<td>$(0.013)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>$0.515^{***}$</td>
<td>$0.642^{***}$</td>
<td>$0.428^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$(0.024)$</td>
<td>$(0.027)$</td>
<td>$(0.025)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>$68.14^{***}$</td>
<td>$96.92^{***}$</td>
<td>$87.88^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>$0.265$</td>
<td>$0.350$</td>
<td>$0.253$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>1662</td>
<td>1662</td>
<td>1674</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based on districts in which incumbents ran for reelection.

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$. 

TABLE 3
Informants’ Perceptions of Potential Candidates’ Electoral Prospects, 1998 (Robust Standard Errors)
district partisanship from Equations 1, 3, and 5, and reveals a pattern remarkably similar to the theoretical expectations in Figure 1. District partisanship obviously has powerful effects on potential candidates’ prospects in this analysis, which takes account of incumbent and potential-candidate quality. In districts where the partisan makeup is predominantly in line with the opposite party, potential candidates’ chances of winning their party’s nomination are very high (almost .8), but their chances in the general election stage are low. As a result, their prospects of winning the seat are low. Nomination prospects decline as the partisan makeup of the district becomes more favorable because potential candidates can expect competition for their party’s nomination to increase. As nomination prospects decline, general election chances improve since the advantages of a favorable partisan majority in the district improve prospects of winning the general election (if the potential candidate can win the nomination). The parabolic effect of dis-

![Graph of Estimated Partial Effects of District Partisanship on Potential Candidates’ Prospects](image-url)
trict partisanship, of course, results from these offsetting prospects of winning each stage.

When the partisan makeup of the district favors one party over the other, there is a pronounced tendency for the incumbent to be elected from the dominant party. Because we have coded district-party identification relative to the partisanship of the potential candidate, this tendency to elect incumbents from the dominant district party means that as district partisanship increasingly favors the PC, the potential candidate and the incumbent tend to share the same party identification.21 This gives us leverage on the effect of incumbency on potential candidates’ prospects, because when the incumbent and the potential candidate are in the same party, the PC must defeat the incumbent in the nomination stage. Of course, when the incumbent and the potential candidate are in the opposite parties, the potential candidate must defeat the incumbent in the general election in order to win. Thus, in Equation 2, which analyzes nomination prospects, the incumbent-party dummy is coded 1 when the incumbent and the potential candidate are in the same party; whereas when analyzing general election prospects in Equation 4, the incumbent-party dummy is reversed to reflect whether the incumbent is in the opposite party.

A negative incumbency effect, assessed by whether the incumbent and potential candidate share the same party, is apparent in each stage of the election process where shared partisanship is relevant. In the nomination stage, the effect is substantial; sharing the partisanship of the incumbent depresses the typical potential candidate’s prospects of winning by about 30 points. This effect is independent of district partisanship, which is also included in the analysis (and retains a significant negative effect). The negative consequences of having to defeat an incumbent in the general election are less severe in depressing potential candidates’ prospects, but they are nonetheless quite dramatic (about 17 points).22

Having suggested that the partisanship of the incumbent relative to the potential candidate depends on district partisanship, we can assess the relative effects of district partisanship and incumbency. The total effect of incumbency on nomination prospects, indicated by the negative consequences to the potential candidates’ prospects of winning when they must defeat an incumbent to win their party’s nomination, is −.304. The total effect of district partisanship on nomination prospects, including its indirect effect through incumbent partisanship, is estimated by its coefficient in Equation 1 (−.072).23 The effect on a potential can-

21 As party identification is more favorable to the potential candidate, the tendency of the partisanship of the PC and the incumbent to coincide is reflected in the correlation between district partisanship (coded as unfavorable-favorable to the PC) and whether the incumbent and PC are in the same party (r = .68).
22 Incumbent partisanship has no significant effect on prospects of winning the seat.
23 Alternatively, we can estimate it by combining the direct and indirect effects in Equation 2, in which case we get a slightly stronger estimate of the total effect of district partisanship (−.077). We use the more conservative estimate from Equation 1 to avoid overstating the effects of district partisanship on potential candidates’ prospects.
didate’s nomination prospects of being in a district that is favorable in partisanship compared with one that is unfavorable (a difference of five points on the seven-point district partisanship scale) is a drop in over 35 points. This effect clearly rivals and may well exceed the effect of incumbency per se. The total effect of district partisanship on general election prospects is a shade weaker than its effects on nomination prospects, but it approximates the impact of incumbency. These results suggest that many analysts may too readily assign to incumbency the effect of the underlying partisanship of the district on potential-candidate deterrence.

The effects of quality are reasonably consistent across all three measures of prospects, with positive effects of potential-candidate strategic and personal quality and negative effects of incumbent qualities. The effect of potential-candidate quality tends to be stronger than the effects of incumbent quality, a point to which we return below. It is clear, however, that variation in personal quality has an effect independent of strategic quality. Indeed, it is reasonable to suppose that personal qualities such as integrity and political skills are causally prior to strategic qualities and resources such as name recognition and fundraising ability (Stone, Maisel, and Maestas 2002). The strategic resources incumbents and potential candidates acquire, in other words, are partially rooted in their personal qualities, which no doubt prove attractive to contributors, party recruiters, and constituents.

How can we use these results to provide a more complete understanding of the incumbency effect? In particular, do the relatively modest incumbent-quality effects mean that our results indicate an equally modest incumbency effect? A simple analogy may help to show why the incumbent-quality effects do not capture the full brunt of incumbency on potential candidates’ electoral prospects. Most of us have no desire to wrestle a 500-pound gorilla. But, if we had to do battle with a gorilla, we might think our prospects would be marginally better against a 400-pound gorilla than against one weighing 500 pounds.

The incumbent-party dummy best captures the incumbency effect by showing the effect on nomination or general election prospects of challenging an incumbent. Facing off against an incumbent, especially for the party’s nomination, is a high-risk thing to do, even if it is not quite as chaney as getting into a ring to wrestle a gorilla. The negative effects of incumbent quality indicate that stronger incumbents hurt more than weaker ones. But it is probably true, as Zaller (1998) contends, that virtually all incumbents are relatively strong, so the effect of variation in incumbent strength is not as great as the effect of facing an incumbent regardless of strength. In other words, a gorilla is a gorilla, and the difference between one weighing 400 pounds and one weighing 500 pounds is relatively

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24 When we remove potential candidates’ or incumbents’ strategic qualities from the analysis, the effect of personal qualities increases. For example, removing potential candidates’ strategic qualities from Equation 5 increases the effect of personal qualities from .035 to .076; removing incumbents’ strategic qualities increases the impact of incumbent personal qualities from −.035 to −.047.
modest. The incumbent-party dummy indicates the effect of facing an incumbent in the nomination or general election, as opposed to not facing an incumbent. In our by now overtaxed analogy, they describe the loss in prospects associated with wrestling any gorilla, while the incumbent-quality measures capture the effects of facing a strong vs. a not-so-strong incumbent. Their effects are like the relatively weak effects we might observe on our chances against gorillas of varying weights.

In keeping with the Zaller thesis, however, it is worth noting that the effects of incumbent quality are potentially quite strong. Across the full range of theoretical variation on the seven-point quality scales, a potential candidate running against an incumbent of highest strategic quality would have prospects of winning the seat about 29 points lower than a potential candidate fortunate enough to run against an incumbent of the lowest possible quality. Likewise, a disparity of similar magnitude in the personal quality of the incumbent would produce a difference in prospects of about 24 points.

Despite the obvious negative effects of incumbent quality on potential candidate prospects, the impact of potential candidates’ quality is stronger. For instance, the additive effect of potential-candidate quality on prospects for winning the seat (.085 + .035 = .120) outweighs the negative effects of incumbent quality (−.041 + −.035 = −.076) by a fair margin. What accounts for this? Notice that in Equation 5, the effects of incumbent and potential-candidate personal quality are exactly offsetting, so the difference in quality effects between incumbents and potential candidates rests on the difference in the impact of strategic quality. Part of the reason for a greater effect of potential candidates’ as opposed to incumbents’ strategic quality may be the greater variance among potential candidates as compared with incumbents. Incumbents not only rate higher than potential candidates on strategic quality (2.07 compared with 1.21 for PCs on the strategic quality index in Table 1), the variance in potential-candidate strategic quality is almost twice that of incumbents (1.35 vs. .74). Incumbents have more consistent advantages of a strategic sort than do incumbents, so variation can be expected to have less of an impact.

In addition to confirming our expectations about the effects of district partisanship and candidate quality on potential candidates’ electoral prospects, our results shed new light on explanations for high incumbent-reelection rates in the U.S. House. First, district partisanship matters a great deal. It has the expected positive effect on general election prospects and negative impact on nomination prospects, and it sets the context for the partisanship of the incumbent. Thus, a substantial part of the explanation for high incumbent-reelection rates is that their district partisans selected them, as most incumbents are affiliated with the district partisan majority. Second, incumbency per se appears to matter a great deal as well, especially in the nomination stage. Incumbents have a huge advantage over prospective challengers in their own party in the primary, and they have an appreciable edge over strong potential candidates in the opposite party when they face off in the general election. Notably, these incumbency advantages accrue to
Representatives independent of their strategic resources and personal qualities. And third, our results consistently show a strong effect of quality among potential candidates, and a somewhat weaker effect of quality among incumbents. Moreover, our results confirm the importance of understanding candidate quality as more than office-holding experience and fundraising ability, to include such personal qualities as integrity and dedication to public service (cf. Maisel, Stone, and Maestas 2001; Mondak 1995; Stone, Maisel, and Maestas 2002).

Conclusion

Potential U.S. House candidates who think strategically about running for the House cannot consider only their prospects in the general election; they must also think about how well they are likely to do in their party’s primary. Explicitly recognizing the two-stage character of the process compels us to confront the complexity of potential candidates’ strategic calculus. PCs cannot merely assume that the factors that help them in the nomination round will also help them in the general election. It is reasonable to suppose that most of the resources and personal characteristics of individual candidates that would help them win their party’s primary would also help them in their general election effort. But it is also true that the effects of district partisanship and incumbency affect potential candidates’ chances very differently in the two stages. It is in the interplay of these factors that the “not-so-simple” character of potential-candidate chances becomes clear.

Getting straight our understanding of the forces at work on potential candidates as they decide whether to run requires us to understand those that specifically bear on their prospects of victory. This in turn requires a research design capable of incorporating measures of the relevant variables, even though the “outcomes” of interest—potential candidates’ ability to contest the election with reasonable prospects of success—depend on events that have not occurred, and most likely will not occur. Ours is the first study to include richly varied measures of incumbent and potential-candidate quality in a design that also embraces sufficient variability in district context to enable us to distinguish among the variables at work on potential candidates’ electoral prospects. Our results not only confirm the importance of district partisanship in the process. They also reveal the extent that district partisanship may be hidden by the more visible and easier-to-measure incumbency factor. The effects of district partisanship are also difficult to uncover because they work in offsetting ways in the nomination and general election stages.

Our evidence also supports the claim advanced most recently by Mondak and Zaller that the electoral process is sensitive to candidate quality (Mondak 1995; Zaller 1998). The higher the quality of the incumbent, the lower the chances of

25 A characteristic that might not play the same in both stages might be ideological “extremism” or a reputation as a strong partisan. Such qualities might be helpful with partisan primary electorates but harmful in the general election campaign.
the average strong potential candidate, should he or she decide to mount a challenge. Moreover, it is not merely "quality" in the strategic resources an incumbent commands, although these have a consistently strong effect reducing PC prospects. Incumbent quality in the more fundamental sense of characteristics such as integrity and competence also reduce their likelihood of winning if they were to mount a challenge. And potential-candidate quality measures consistently have stronger effects on prospective challengers' prospects than parallel measures of incumbent quality. Our results can help reassure those who look to the electoral process to select leaders who, on a variety of dimensions, are well suited for high public office.

The offsetting effects of district partisanship on potential candidates' prospects in the nomination and general election stages indicate that the district environment most congenial to potential candidates' chances of winning the seat is balanced in its partisan makeup. Virtually all congressional election scholars would expect that the most competitive districts are ones where the partisan makeup of the district is balanced or runs against the partisanship of the incumbent, but this is almost always based on analysis of the general election stage alone. Focusing on the general election only, it is easy to see that balanced districts would be attractive to strong candidates in both parties because their prospects in the election are relatively even. Thus, an out-party potential candidate in a balanced district would have a better chance of winning the general election than a minority party potential candidate in a district heavily against her in its partisan makeup. When we focus on both stages of winning the seat (as potential candidates surely must), we see that these districts are not attractive to the strongest potential candidates because their general election prospects in these districts are especially high. The reason, of course, is because the combined chances are at their highest in these districts. Because the competitiveness of elections depends vitally on the quality of the candidates who decide to run, districts that are balanced in their partisan makeup may experience competitive elections because potential candidates see their prospects as relatively good, and are therefore more likely to run.

Competitive House elections are essential to providing electoral choice, fostering accountability, and promoting representation. Observers have appreciated for some time that electoral competition depends directly upon the quality of the challenge that is mounted, especially when incumbents run for reelection. Understanding how and why quality affects prospects and the conditions under which strong potential challengers are most likely to succeed helps us to comprehend the basis of competition in House elections. In an era when contested congressional elections appear to be in decline, increasing our appreciation of what fosters competition and choice should be high on our research agenda.

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