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The Advantages of Incumbency, Candidate Image, and the Vote

by

Jonathan Mott

Candidate image is an important predictor of voting behavior in congressional elections. Voters usually compare the qualities of both candidates and choose the candidate that they perceive to be best. The evidence provided indicates that incumbents have an advantage under normal circumstances, in establishing, reinforcing, and maintaining positive images of themselves in the minds of the electorate. The source of this advantage for incumbents is the result of privileges and the amount of time they can devote to campaigning. However, the decisive advantage of incumbency is money. Incumbents raise and spend a great deal more money than challengers. Incumbents are also able to utilize various media forms more extensively than challengers to build positive images among voters. Further evidence is provided to show that once images are established, incumbents fare even better, because these images become more stable and harder to change. Public financing of elections, not term limits, is probably the best way to make congressional elections competitive again.

Incumbents win because Americans despise Congress but love their particular Congressman, who toils tirelessly to deliver services. Incumbents are entrenched by democratic choices, and Americans have a constitutional right to democracy, not good government.

George F. Will

Introduction

In the boxing matches of congressional elections, the weathered, reigning champions usually come out on top. The young, bushy-tailed challengers often find out only after stepping into the ring that they never had a chance. More often than not, the champ, flexing huge muscles of money and the perks of office, soundly defeats all-comers. Indeed, the matches fought in the ring are usually no-contest affairs.

It hasn’t always been this way though. There once was a time when the champ would voluntarily step out of the ring, leaving the contest to new, fresh faces.¹ Now, however, there is a greater likelihood of the champ dying in between matches than actually losing one.

Because of such odds, most viable contenders are content to wait for the day the champ meets with such a fate before they put on their gloves and step into the ring. Challengers once brought fierce competition into these matches, but the most they muster now is usually only token opposition. The judges of these contests consistently declare the champ the overwhelming winner.

Admittedly, the above analogy is not perfect. The outcomes of elections, unlike boxing matches, are influenced by more factors than head-to-head comparisons and candidate showdowns. Partisanship, the political environment, and a host of other variables come into play when two candidates vie for the same elected office. However, the fact remains that competition has all but disap-
peared from congressional races in America. The "reigning champion" has an undisputed advantage over challengers.

**Background**

Numerous studies have attempted to assess the importance of incumbency and other factors of candidate image in congressional elections. For many years, the consensus was that congressional elections were largely decided on the basis of national political forces. Supporters of this thesis characterized congressional elections in the following three categories: (1) partisan affairs in which party affiliation was the only important predictor of voting behavior, (2) referenda on the incumbent president’s job performance, and (3) the means through which voters could either reward or punish members of Congress for the condition of the economy (Niemi and Weisberg 1984, 199). More recent research, however, indicates that congressional elections may indeed be more susceptible to local influences than earlier studies had led political scientists to believe. Much of this new research rests on the assumption that candidate qualities are important to voter choices and, as a rule, incumbents are better known and better liked (Niemi and Weisberg 1984, 204).

My thesis, and the impetus for writing this paper, is an extension of these assumptions. I contend that the trappings of incumbency have allowed incumbents to become better known and better liked than challengers, thereby causing the demise of competition in congressional elections. While this thesis is accepted fairly well among political scientists, there is room for elaboration. Indeed, the trends in congressional elections mentioned above have led to a heightened level of interest in the study of candidate appeal and image; however, most of the resulting research has focussed on presidential candidates and their campaigns. Furthermore, because relatively few studies have been done to assess the link between the advantages of incumbency and the establishment of positive images by congressional incumbents, there is reason to examine this problem.

As I have noted briefly, there are a host of factors which influence the outcome of congressional elections. I contend, however, that the image and appeal of candidates are becoming increasingly important factors of voting behavior. This, coupled with the fact that incumbents are far better equipped to establish positive images in the minds of voters than are challengers, leads to a serious discrepancy in the viability of incumbent and challenger candidates. My research indicates that the major factor contributing to this disparity is the huge advantage incumbents enjoy in the fund raising aspect of electioneering.

In order to establish this relationship, I have defined four objectives for this paper. First, I will review the existing literature on candidate appeal and image. Second, because of the lack of a systematic approach to this area of study, I will present my model of candidate appeal and image. Third, I will address the advantages of incumbency (with an emphasis on the ability to raise money), especially those which clearly give an advantage to incumbents in the campaign process. Furthermore, I will show how these advantages help incumbents to project positive images of themselves in the minds of the electorate. I will also assess the plausibility of tying these images to voter choice. Fourth, and last, I will elaborate on my argument which links candidate image to voter choice, paying specific attention to the theoretical bases of my thesis and examine some models of voter rationality. Having accomplished these tasks, I will make some general conclusions about
congressional races and offer some recommendations for reform.

PART I
Candidate Appeal and Image

There has been relatively little research done in the area of the appeal and image of congressional candidates. There have been, however, some very important developments which would be foolish to overlook. Even more important for the purposes of this paper, though, many of these studies serve as both a basis and launching pad for my own research and subsequent conclusions.

First of all, I should address the school of thought which rests on the assertion that congressional races are, in fact, not local, candidate-centered affairs at all, but nationally driven political events. Proponents of this school of thought point to early studies, based on the 1958 Michigan election surveys, which showed that voters, in general, knew little of the candidates running for Congress in their districts. This, in fact, is true. Most voters still cannot recall the name of either candidate when asked by pollsters. This fact, along with other supporting evidence, has led many researchers and political scientists to conclude that congressional elections are not decided on the basis of candidate saliency but on the other, national factors mentioned above (partisanship, presidential popularity, and the status of the economy).

More recent studies and research, though, have tended to refute this concept of congressional elections. Much of the research now shows that candidates are much more important than was originally thought (Niemi and Weisberg 1984, 204). At the same time, it is clear that incumbents are generally better known and better liked. Even supporters of the congressional elections as national events thesis like Jacobson and Kernell admit that on the individual level, there is little evidence that voters actually base their voting decisions on things like the state of their personal economic situation (Jacobson and Kernell 1982).

Further contributions to the study of candidate image by Mann and Wolfinger support the idea that congressional elections are influenced by local factors—especially the qualities of the candidates (Mann and Wolfinger 1980). Mann and Wolfinger include things like incumbency, name recognition, reputation, and "preference" or favorability of candidates in their discussion of candidate appeal and image. In fact, they argue that voters do not base their decisions solely on partisanship or incumbency status as some authors have concluded. What is more likely to happen, they argue, is that voters will assess each candidate, compare them, and choose the one that they like best (Mann and Wolfinger 1980, 280). Consequently, even a candidate who is perceived as "neutral" (neither negatively nor positively) may win if their opponent’s image is sufficiently negative (see Box 1).

Mann and Wolfinger conclude that candidate image and appeal are very important predictors for the outcomes of congressional elections (288). To support this contention, they explain that most voters recognize the names of both candidates in congressional races (virtually all voters recognize the incumbent’s name and about two-thirds recognize the challenger’s name). Furthermore, most voters can also attribute qualities and values to each candidate. Though these voter perceptions are based on thin information and are highly personalized, they have a dramatic impact on voter decisions (Mann and Wolfinger 1980, 288).

One of the most comprehensive looks at candidate image was published in 1976. Nimmo and Savage, in their book *Candidates and Their Images*, concluded through their
research of presidential, congressional, and other elections that candidate image is a function of both candidate "projects" and voter perceptions (31). They further concluded that candidate images are based on what voters perceive of each candidate's actions and traits (50-63). In fact, because of this perceptual model of voter imaging, they contend that candidates may often have more than one image in the eyes of the electorate (73). In the end, they conclude that their work was but a beginning in the area of candidate appeal and image. Based on their research, though, they concluded that image does effect voter choice, but the link between the two was not yet fully understood (208-9).

A Model for Candidate Appeal and Image

The problem that Nimmo and Savage pointed out is still largely unsolved. Sheer logic will confirm the idea that candidate

Bill Orton vs. Karl Snow: Who's Image was Better?

In 1990, Bill Orton upset Karl Snow in the race for Utah's 3rd Congressional District seat. Many observers have argued, though, that Orton's victory was more due to Snow's negative image than to Orton's positive image.

Notice that the graphs at the left show a much larger percentage of Orton's votes as votes cast against Snow than vice versa. It is quite possible that Orton was viewed as neutral because he was fairly unknown. Snow's image, however, had become increasingly negative after the primary. Apparently, a candidate need not have a strong, positive image in order to win—it only has to be more positive than the opponent's image. (Data taken from KBYU's 1990 Utah Colleges Exit Poll)
A MODEL FOR CANDIDATE APPEAL AND IMAGE

Personal Appeal
(Who the candidate is)
- Looks, voice, presence
- Personality
- Demographics

Political Identity
(What the candidate has done)
- Party
- Incumbency
- Experience
- Voting record

Direct perceptions

Media

Campaign
(What the candidate projects his or her image)
- Issues, themes
- Media
- Platform
- Style, strategy

Perceived Image of the Candidate

Figure 1.
and staged events, but they also attempt to control how the news media projects their images.

Admittedly, this is not a perfect model. All races are not alike. The less visible the race, the less likely voters are to know much about the candidates involved. Additionally, depending on the severity or intensity of any one of the candidate's characteristics, the campaign may have only a minimal effect in projecting a positive image. For example, David Duke is currently trying to portray himself as the best choice for the president of the United States in 1992. However, his affiliation with the Ku Klux Klan, a huge part of his political identity, will undoubtedly obscure the images he attempts to project through his campaign. Furthermore, if candidates attempt to represent themselves as something that they are not, or try to obscure an embarrassing part of their past, the media will most likely alert the voters to the candidate's "real" identity.

As the literature indicates, though, a candidate's image is an important factor of voter choice, and my model begins to explain why that is the case. Most authors agree that candidate image and appeal have a direct impact on voter choice. In fact, many scholars argue that it is at least the most important short term predictor of voting behavior (Flanigan and Zingale 1991, 114). The ability to project a positive image is a very important factor in campaigning.

These conclusions naturally lead to the following question: What kind of candidates have the best images? Secondly, why do these candidates have images that are more positive than others? The remainder of this paper will be devoted to answering these two questions.

PART II
The Incumbent Advantage

The answer to the first of the two question just posed is clear. Incumbents are, by far, better known and better liked than their challengers. Incumbents are almost always reelected. Moreover, they usually win handily. Vital Statistics on Congress, a publication of Congressional Quarterly Press, puts incumbents who sought reelection to House seats in 1990 into the following three categories: (1) those who won more than 60% of the vote, (2) those who won less than 60% of the vote but were still reelected, and (3) those incumbents who were defeated. In 1990, 312 out of the 435 races were won by incumbents in the first category while only fifteen fell into the third category (Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin 1991, 80-1). Why are incumbents so formidable? Simply put, it is because they have an overwhelming advantage in terms of political firepower.

The Perks of Office

Members of Congress have a vast number of resources at their disposal. In researching these resources, David Vogler found that the "perks" of office--things like personal staff allowances for members of Congress (around fifteen staffers are allowed for Representatives and about twice that many for Senators), the franking privilege, and travel allowances that permit congressmen to return home nearly every weekend--cost the taxpayers between $500,000 and $1 million per congressperson per year (1988, 88). Vogler specifically points to the increasing staff sizes, which have permitted members of Congress to run state and district offices for constituent services, as a major source of advantage for incumbents (224). While Vogler's assertion that the main purpose of these home offices is to help incumbents get reelected (225) may
be a little strong, the political benefits they provide for incumbents are tremendous. Besides those listed above, there are many other resources which contribute to incumbent advantages.

Because each of these perks and advantages offers unique opportunities to members of Congress which allow them to build positive images and increase their advantage over challengers, they deserve to be addressed individually. While these advantages are numerous where the formation and development of candidate appeal and image are concerned, the most important advantages are constituency service, the franking privilege, time, exposure and reputation, and the ability to raise money.

Constituency Service. In his book *Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establishment*, Morris Fiorina adds to the weight of Vogler's conclusions about the ability of incumbents to provide services to their constituencies (1989). In the newly added Chapter 11 of his second edition, though, Fiorina clarifies some misunderstandings about his arguments. He makes it clear that, by no means is constituent service the deciding factor leading to the domination of congressional elections by incumbents. In fact, he contends that constituency service accounts for only about five to eight percentage points of an incumbent's advantage over challengers (99). He argues further that the polling resources, the ability to raise money, and the generally poor quality of challengers are other, possibly more dramatic, advantages or factors of incumbent domination (99-100).

Still, constituent service is one of the best tools a member of Congress can use to build a positive image in his or her district. Not only do the people who receive assistance from the congressman's office become endeared to the officeholder, but they spread the story of how they were helped among their friends. Indeed, it is as George Will once wrote: "Incumbents win because Americans despise Congress but love their particular Congressman, who toils tirelessly to deliver services" (Will 1990, 236). Furthermore, the advantages of constituent service become even more pronounced the longer a congressman is in office. Not only does the aggregate of services rendered amass a sizeable support base among the electorate as time passes, but a senior member of Congress is better equipped to supply even more services. Jewell and Patterson maintain that the seniority system, especially in the House, leads to a Congress where the longer members are in office, the greater is their ability to "deliver" and, therefore, get reelected (Jewell and Patterson 1986, 116).

The Franking Privilege. Direct mailings are one of the most touted campaign tactics of recent times. While there are some limits on the use of the franking privilege in Congress, members send out reams of letters each year to their constituents, "free of charge"--which is the literal meaning of *frank*. While his study is somewhat dated, David Mayhew found that out of the 158 House members who were elected in the mid-1960s, 121 said that they sent out regular newsletters to their constituents, and eighty-nine periodically sent out mail questionnaires (Mayhew 1974, 50). Since then, the use of franked mail has become even more pervasive. Some members of Congress go as far as to send letters of congratulations and information on baby care to the new parents in their districts. All of these mailings add up to a powerful campaign tool. Challengers, on the other hand, must pay thousands of dollars each time they want to cover the district with letters.
Time. While time is not an exclusive gift given to members of Congress (they still have only twenty four hours in each day), incumbents have a clear advantage in the amount of time they have available for campaigning. While in office, a member of the House or Senate spends a large amount of his or her time preparing for the next election. Most begin serious preparations at least a year in advance (Salmore and Salmore 1985, 71). Scruggs contends that the power of office allows candidates to mold their images over time (Scruggs 1991). To support this notion, he points to the efforts of Orrin Hatch, a Utah Senator, to increase his support among women. According to some post-election polling, Hatch’s consultants found that he wasn’t faring too well with women. Consequently, the Senator has, for the past six years, shifted his focus to women’s and children’s issues. He has sponsored an annual Women’s Conference in Salt Lake City and has taken issue stances that, according to survey research, women are more responsive to than men. Members of Congress are, in effect, constantly campaigning while their challengers are not blessed with nearly as much time to mold their images among voters.

Exposure and Reputation. As previously noted, incumbents are generally better known and better liked than their challengers. Much of this is due to their ability to communicate directly, and indirectly, with constituents (Salmore and Salmore 1985, 61). While the franking privilege contributes significantly to this advantage, other facets of incumbency are also important and contribute to further incumbent-challenger disparities. For example, incumbents enjoy a decisive margin in name recognition over challengers. One survey found that incumbents had a 92% name recognition while challengers were at a much lower 54% (Jewell and Patterson 1986, 44). Once an incumbent’s name is well known, a relative lack of news coverage can also contribute to a positive candidate image. Scruggs argues that one of the most important aspects of incumbent advantage is that, once the member of Congress has established a positive image, most voters feel that "no news is good news" (1991). Voters are willing to assume that if they hear nothing, the representative or senator is doing their job, and doing it well. This is especially true for members of Congress who have won their first reelection bid (Scruggs 1991).

Media coverage, while potentially devastating, can build and strengthen an incumbent’s positive image as well. Many opportunities are available for members of Congress to get "free" or "earned" media coverage. Mayhew’s study found that forty-eight of the Representatives he interviewed wrote regular columns in local newspapers or magazines, and another eighty-two regularly reported home by means of radio or television (Mayhew 1974, 50). At least one Congressman has even run his own radio program (51).

Members of Congress are able to contact large numbers of voters through the means listed above. Many congresspersons even make a habit of appearing at social events unannounced or speaking at "non-political" functions. One congressman is said to have never lost a precinct where he gave a high school commencement speech (Mayhew 1974, 50). Activities such as these, combined with campaign activities (to be discussed later), allow incumbents to contact a surprisingly large number of voters. In contrast, American National Elections Study (ANES) data shows that most voters are never contacted by challengers (see Figure 2). In fact, congressional incumbents are able to contact almost 90% of voters before the election while challengers contact less than 45%. In other words, about twice as many voters have had contact with
the incumbent than the challenger. Since challengers are rarely even able to contact a majority of voters, it follows that they are seldom able to convince a majority of voters to fire the incumbent and hire the challenger.

This discrepancy in voter contacts increases the longer a member of Congress is in office. Obviously, the longer a congressperson serves, the better they become known by their constituents. Mann found that voters, in response to specific questions about candidate traits, chose the "Don't Know" response only 15-25% of the time in regard to long term incumbents. The numbers went up to 20-45% for new incumbents, 40-60% for challengers with prior exposure, and 60-75% for new challengers (Mann 1984, 262).

By utilizing the advan
tages I have described, a member of Congress can foster positive images while becoming increasingly well known. The more established an incumbent’s image becomes, the more difficult it becomes, under normal circumstances, to change that image.

The Ability to Raise Money

The ability of incumbents to raise money may be their biggest advantage over challengers in congressional races. Due to strict campaign expenditure reporting laws, there is very good data on both challenger and incumbent spending. Merely glancing at the reported figures will reveal an alarming trend—challengers are being out spent by a large margin. Figure 3 shows incumbent and challenger spending in U.S. House races from 1976 through 1990 (the figures are in mean net dollars). The graph illustrates two clear trends. First, the overall level of campaign spending has increased every year for more than a decade. In fact, rises in campaign spending have exceeded the overall inflation rate (Abramowitz 1991, 49).

However, the second trend, which is not completely illustrated by the graph, is that challenger spending has decreased.
sharply. The drop in challenger spending, which started in 1984, is even more dramatic when inflation is controlled for. Adjusted for inflation, overall challenger expenditures dropped 30% during the 1980s (Abramowitz 1991, 51). While House challengers were, on the average, only out spent by about $30,000 dollars, or 36%, in 1976, they were out spent by an average of almost $290,000, or 73%, in 1990.

Similar spending trends are apparent in Senate races as well. Figure 4 shows campaign expenditures for Senate races from 1976 through 1990. Here again, the overall cost of running a campaign has skyrocketed from about $625,000 for incumbents in 1976 to more than $3.5 million in 1990 (the figures are in mean net dollars). Challenger expenditures have also increased, but not at the same rate. In 1976, challengers were out spent by only about $160,000, or 30%. But, by 1990, the gap had grown to more than $1.7 million, or 52%. While both challenger and incumbent expenditures dropped in 1990, the proportion is essentially unchanged.

The reasons for this discrepancy in the ability to raise money are simple. People most often donate their money to the candidate that is most likely to win. This is especially true of Political Action Committees which, in 1988, gave 75% of all their

contributions to incumbents (Magleby and Nelson 1990, 53-4). PAC money accounted for almost 40% of all House campaign expenditures in the same year.

PART III
The Implications of the Incumbent Advantage

While it is obvious that incumbents are better equipped to run election campaigns than are challengers, it is more difficult to assess the impact of this disparity on candidate salience. What is the overall effect of these discrepancies between incumbents and challengers?

Election Results

The most important result of the discrepancy between the fund raising abilities of incumbents and challengers is the outcome of elections. As previously stated, incumbents almost always win their reelection bids, and they usually win by large margins. In 1988, fifty-six of the 435 House races were uncontested, and 70% of the 435 were won by incumbents who won more than 65% of the votes cast (Will 1990, 236). A grand total of five incumbents (about 2%) seeking reelection were defeated in the same year (Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin 1990, 79). In 1990, there were seventy House incumbents who ran unopposed (Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin 1991, 74). There were even three unopposed Senate races, where competition is usually much stronger (Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin 1991, 78).

This trend toward incumbent domination in congressional races was recognized by Mayhew in the early 1970s (Mayhew 1974) and was reassessed by Fiorina (1989). Both authors came to similar conclusions—the "marginal", or closely contested, races for House seats were becoming a thing of the past, and, to a lesser degree, the same trend was appearing in the Senate. Fiorina attributes this trend to the advantages of incumbency—especially constituent service—and the declining strength of challengers (1989, 17-28).

The Absence of Strong Challengers

One development that cannot technically be called an advantage of incumbency which has, nonetheless, contributed to the entrenchment of incumbents in Congress is the lack of strong challengers. However, in pointing to this trend as a cause of incumbent domination, it is important to point out that this argument is somewhat tautological. It's the same old question with a new twist—Which came first? The strong incumbent or the weak challenger?

Much like the "chicken or the egg" question, this query may never be fully resolved. However, one thing is quite clear—the trend toward weak challengers feeds the already formidable bias toward incumbents in elections. Jacobson supports this notion when he points out that incumbency alone does not account for high reelection rates. They are a function of both the highly positive images of incumbents and the comparatively much more negative images of challengers (Niemi and Weisberg 1984, 204). But, why are challenger images so much worse than that of incumbents?

A recent article by Banks and Kiewiet presents convincing evidence that weak challengers are more likely to run against incumbents, while strong challengers are more inclined to wait for an open-seat race (Banks and Kiewiet 1989, 1013). Their reasoning behind this conclusion is straightforward: weak candidates have a better chance of beating an incumbent than winning a major party's nomination in an open seat race, while the
odds for strong candidates are reversed (1014). This scenario becomes somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy because, for the most part, "weaks" confine their election bids to races against incumbents, thereby avoiding a tough primary against a strong candidate. Likewise, strong candidates sit it out until their chances of winning are maximized. When weak candidates run against incumbents, they win significantly more often than when they run in open-seat races (Banks and Kiewiet 1989, 1008).

The inability to raise the large sums of money required to run a competitive race against an incumbent is also a major deterrent for even fairly strong candidates. Abramowitz argues that this fact contributes directly to incumbent dominated electoral success (1991, 34).

**The Effects of Money on Electoral Competition**

Having established the fact that challengers cannot raise money with near the success enjoyed by incumbents, I now turn to an explanation of the direct effects of this

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**Challenger Spending and Competition in 1990 House Races**

**Is Money the Answer?**

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<tr>
<th>Challenger Spending</th>
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Landslides are defined as races where the incumbent won more than 60% of the votes. Close races are those in which the incumbent won less than 60% of the votes but still won. Defeats are those races that were lost by incumbents. Notice that the more challengers spend, the more competitive the race becomes.

(Data: Ornstein, 1991)

**Figure 5.**
discrepancy. First of all, let's take another look at the 1988 election results for House races. As I stated earlier, *Vital Statistics* put incumbents who ran for reelection into three categories: those who won by large margins, those who won close races, and those who lost (Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin 1991, 80-81). When the margins these incumbents won by is compared with the margin by which they out spent their challengers, an interesting trend appears (see Figure 5). Incumbents who won their reelection bids with 60% or more of the votes out spent their challengers six to one, with average expenditures of $362,000 to $61,000, for a difference of over $300,000 (Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin 1991, 80). Those who won reelection with less than 60% of the vote out spent their challengers by an even larger amount ($615,000 to $248,000 for a difference of $367,000), but by a smaller percentage--they spent 2.5 times as much as their challengers. Even incumbents that lost spent more than their challengers, but the margin is about the same--$674,000 to $445,000, for a difference of $229,000, or 1.5 times as much as challengers.

In assessing this data, it is important to keep two things in mind. First, of the 435 House races in 1990, incumbents in the first category were often unopposed or only faced token opposition. This accounts for the markedly low spending levels of the challengers they faced. Second, while it is apparent that incumbent spending is a function of challenger expenditures, it is also true that high incumbent expenditures are usually the result of political trouble and low favorable ratings. Furthermore, when an incumbent is in "trouble," the challenger's chances of raising money are much better because potential donors pay attention to polls. The problem is, though, that there were 406 incumbents who sought reelection in 1990 and only 23% of those won less than 60% of the votes, and overall, 96% of them won (Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin 1990, 59 and 80). Competition was almost nonexistent, and very few incumbents were in the kind of "trouble" that would have opened the door to challenger competition.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to establish which is the deciding factor of competition--challenger money or a decline in incumbent image--it is important to keep in mind that both are important in races where incumbents actually lose.

Abramowitz argues that a challenger's ability to get information to the public and take on the incumbents image is directly connected to his or her ability to raise money (1991, 54). In fact, he argues

*Electoral accountability requires effective competition. It is not enough to allow challengers to criticize the performance of incumbent officeholders. Unless challengers have the resources to communicate with the public, voters will not have the information they need to make an informed choice.... Political stagnation and one-party rule are the consequences of an electoral process which renders incumbents almost invulnerable to defeat (54).*

He also points out that it is more important than ever for challengers to spend large amounts of money if they hope to beat an incumbent (51). According to his research, challenger spending is now the best indicator of competitiveness in congressional races (44). Furthermore, he asserts that in addition to the increasing inability of challengers to keep up with incumbent spending (see Figures 3 and 4), challenger expenditures, dollar for dollar, now have less impact on an incumbent's margin in polls and election results than ever (52).

King and Gelman further contend that electoral responsiveness to challenger campaigns against House incumbents has decreased dramatically since 1946 (1991, 130). They attribute 30% of this decline in responsiveness directly to incumbency, while suggesting that the rest of the change may be due to the large
number of powerful candidates with vast resources who were drawn into congressional races after World War II due to the heightened desirability of elected office (130).

Even incumbents without vast resources, though, are able to raise large sums of money, which allows them to use the media and other means to have "repetitive persuasive communication with likely voters," which, according to Beaudry and Schaeffer, in their book *Winning State and Local Elections*, is the key to electoral success (1986, 2). Mann and Wolfinger also come to a similar conclusion. An incumbent's advantage in image can largely be attributed to the ability of incumbents to contact voters (see Figure 2) (Mann and Wolfinger 1980, 283). In order to contact thousands of voters, a candidate needs a sizeable amount of money. If these contacts can be made, though, images are planted and voting decisions are affected.

**Incumbent and Challenger Campaigns**

Due to their decisive advantage in fund raising, incumbents generally have better organized, better run, and more effective campaigns. However, there are some disadvantages to being an incumbent. As I indicate in note number five on the Orrin Hatch story, some positions taken or votes cast as a member of Congress can have a negative impact on an incumbent's image. Furthermore, incumbents, to a large degree, are limited in their ability to project carefully crafted images of themselves through campaigns. While a challenger's "canvass" is blank, ready to be painted by creative consultants and campaign managers, the image on the incumbent's canvass is relatively complete, leaving only room for "touching up" (Scruggs 1991). Another factor which may hurt incumbents somewhat is the "throw the bums out" mood which is spreading throughout the American electorate. Furthermore, voters receive impressions of candidates from sources other than the candidate's campaign (see Figure 1), and more scrutiny is usually given to the incumbents record in the media.

Nonetheless, incumbents still enjoy a decisive advantage in campaigning. Researchers have concluded that this advantage does, in fact, impact voting behavior. In three case studies, Mann found that voters responded to campaign efforts to portray crafted images of candidates (1984). Voters were also found to be responsive to a campaign's efforts to characterize the opponent (Niemi and Weisberg 1984, 262-3). In these instances, the "political dialogue" of the candidates became part of the public's perceived image of them, and consequently, part of the rationale behind the choices made on election day.

One related aspect of a candidate's image which I have not addressed is job performance. According to ANES data from 1974 to 1988, when voters disapprove of the incumbent's job performance, they are more than three times as likely to vote for the challenger. However, only about 10% of voters polled stated that they disapproved of the incumbent's performance. Overall positive ratings of incumbents are common in pre-election polls and exit surveys, and it is not easy for challengers to overcome these popular images. More ANES data shows that even when a challenger is rated as "hot" on the candidate salience thermometer, they only win 12% of the time.

The visibility of the challenger is an essential ingredient of competitiveness. When challengers wage competitive campaigns (mostly due to, for some reason, an increased ability to raise money), knowledge of both candidates increases and challengers do much better (Niemi and Weisberg 1984, 263). Conversely, incumbents have a clear advantage in obscure elections.
The evidence which I have presented substantiates my model of candidate appeal and image. It also lends support to a model of voter decision making. There is considerable evidence supporting the idea that the more established a candidate's image becomes, the more difficult that image is to change. The conclusions drawn by researchers in this area supports the assertion that voters, upon receiving information about a candidate, filter the information through existing information, instead of viewing it objectively. This contributes to stable candidate images among voters. One possible way of thinking of voter imaging and decision making is illustrated in Figure 6. Because there is nothing obvious about this model, I will first explain my reasoning behind it.

The Voter Thought Process

Some recent studies of public opinion and voting behavior have focused on the thought processes that people go through when they receive information and form opinions and images of candidates. Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh, all of The University of New York-Stony Brook, have developed an "impression-driven" model of voting behavior and opinion formulation (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989). Their model holds that "evaluations are formed and updated 'on-line' as information is encountered" (399). The implication of their assertion is that voters only selectively rely on the candidate information they have been exposed to. In fact, they argue that voters make judgements of the information they receive in light of the information that they have already taken in. Because voters perceive political information selectively, the "mix of evidence available in memory [about candidates] is a nonveridical representation of the information to which subjects are exposed" (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989, 399). Voter choice, then, becomes a function of cognitive perception, which filters new information through existing beliefs and attitudes.

Further supporting evidence for this model is provided by Conover and Feldman who argue that, even though candidates are ambiguous and very seldom take strong issue stances, voters will often associate issue stances and ideologies with candidates (1989). Their contention is that voters, based on their individual political beliefs and minuscule candidate cues, infer the existence of these candidate stances (312). In other words, a voter's beliefs about the specific issue stances taken by candidates are more a function of the voter's inferences than of reality. Consequently, once images of candidates are formed, voters will view new information through the filter of those images. They will then make inferences about the newly encountered facts in order to bring them in line with their existing opinions.

Flanigan and Zingale also examine this phenomenon of voting behavior in their book Political Behavior of the American Electorate (1991). They point out that individuals are unwilling to accept facts that are contrary to their opinions or beliefs (145). Consequently, people have several defense mechanisms against "the potential dissonance represented by new information that conflicts with their existing attitudes" (145). These mechanisms include selective exposure, or ignoring pieces of conflicting information, selective perception, or misinterpreting the information or rejecting it by discounting the credibility of the source, compartmentalization, or not linking the new information with the previously held, conflicting attitude or opinion, and rationalization, or developing a false explanation for the new information in order to avoid the real one (145). Flanigan and Zingale also argue that
strongly held beliefs are more closely protected by these mechanisms than others; therefore, political views are fairly changeable. However, I point to their conclusion that "typically, individuals will change dissonant patterns in the easiest way" possible (145). Because of this tendency, it is likely that the longer an image of a candidate is held, and the more an incumbent is able to reinforce that image, the more filters there are for new information to pass through. It, therefore, becomes harder to improve or attack that image, under normal circumstances, the longer they are held.

The way voters perceive candidates and make voting decisions about them, then, can be thought as illustrated in Figure 6. Notice that the incumbent/challenger variable is prior to all of the means through
which voters receive candidate images. The model also takes into account the fact that campaign efforts are not solely aimed at directly influencing voters but also at influencing the way the media projects the candidate’s image.

PART V
Conclusion and Recommendations

Competition is a thing of the past in congressional elections. No longer does the United States of America have a citizen legislature where men and women go, for a turn, to serve as representatives of the people, and then return to their constituencies and allow others their "turn." While some arguments can be made in favor of the professionalization of Congress, both fiscal and electoral accountability have gone out the back door as incumbency has dead-bolted the front door. Abramowitz was right. Electoral accountability does demand competition; but incumbents are working harder than ever, with higher rates of success than ever, to make sure that competition doesn't resurface.

In response to a seemingly unresponsive, incumbent dominated electoral process, American voters have become caught up in a populist "throw the bums out, reelect no one!" sentiment. Three states have now placed term limits on their state office holders. Oklahoma's voters passed a ballot proposition in November of 1990 that limits the terms of state legislators to a total of twelve years (Moss 1990). In the same year, California's Proposition 140 won the support of voters, thereby limiting the terms of state assemblymen to six years and state senators to eight. It also eliminates legislator pensions and slashes $60 million from the state legislature's operating fund (Uhler 1990, 1). In Colorado, 71% of the voters approved a measure setting an eight year limit for state elected officials. Moreover, it also limited the terms of the state's members of Congress to twelve years (Moss 1990). A similar measure was narrowly defeated in the state of Washington in November of 1991.

While the idea of term limits on the members of Congress is overwhelmingly popular, it might cause more problems than it would solve. In an article in the Washington Post National Weekly Edition, Ornstein argues that there isn't an "easy way to take arrogance and excessive ambition out of politics [and] bring enlightened amateurism back to governance" (1991a). Limiting terms, he asserts, would only fill members of Congress with more "corrupt ambition," as they begin campaigning for the Senate the day they enter the House, or begin "cozying up" to lawyers and lobbyists in order to secure jobs for themselves after their limited number of terms had expired. Magleby points out that term limits would essentially increase congressional terms to the newly limited number of years (1991). This would become the reality, he contends, because most candidates will opt to wait until their chances of winning are the greatest--they will wait until the incumbent is forced to retire so they can run for an open seat. Magleby further contends that term limits would make the larger states even more powerful in the House. One of Ornstein's best arguments against term limits is that the power of the members of Congress in general, not just that of the small states, would be diminished, and the other branches of government and the massive congressional support staff would gain power proportionately (1991a).

While all of these assertions are enough, by themselves, to cast doubt on the viability of the call for congressional term limits, I believe that there is an even better argument against them: they are anti-democratic. George Will was only partially right when he said that "incumbents are entrenched by democratic choices" (Will 1991, 236). If voters don't know what all of their choices...
are, democratic decisions are impossible. Instead of limiting the choices of voters then, moves should be made to expand them by instilling competition in congressional races.

**Recommendations**

If term limits are not the answer to solving the problems of incumbent domination, we must turn elsewhere for a solution. As Ornstein concludes, not only would term limits "sock it to" incumbents, but they would sock it to the rest of us too (1991a). The aim of political science, in my estimation, is not to merely understand politics, but to offer solutions to problems that will better the human condition. My recommendation, however, is not a "quick fix," but a long term solution that is in agreement with established principles of American democracy and republicanism. The real need lies in putting competition back into congressional races. One of the best ways to do this would be to finance campaigns with public funds.

Most challengers never raise enough money to break the threshold of visibility, which is evidenced by the low number of voters who were contacted by challengers and who recognize their names. If the playing field were to be leveled at least where fund raising is concerned, challengers might fare much better. Incumbents would still enjoy numerous advantages, but there would be some semblance of competition. In his aforementioned article on competitiveness in House elections, Abramowitz presented a model which simulated the 1984 House races as if there were publicly financed elections. He concluded that as many as forty-five incumbents could have been defeated (1991, 52). The problem though, he points out, is that the level of competition wasn't reached in his model until each candidate was allotted $800,000. Members of Congress would be hard pressed to give that much money to any one who decided to challenge them for their seat. Furthermore, selling such an idea to the tax-paying public would not be an easy task. In light of these obstacles, Abramowitz suggests a system of public financing where candidates who can first raise $200,000 would then be eligible for matching funds from a public campaign pool, similar to the way presidential elections are financed (52).

This idea may be far from perfect, but it appears to be the best alternative. At the same time, without other reforms, like a balanced budget requirement for the national government and some changes in the seniority and committee systems of Congress, the impact of public financing might be limited. Many opponents of public financing further argue that the scales would still be tipped heavily in favor of incumbents. I agree. Public financing alone will not solve all of the problems this nation faces; however, it would certainly be a step in the right direction.

**NOTES**

1. While there was an increase in the number of voluntary retirements from the House during the 1970s, in the year in which that decade saw the most retirements--there were 49 in 1978--there were still incumbents in 86% of the 435 races. See *Vital Statistics on Congress, 1991-1992*, pg. 60.

2. When voters are asked to give the names of the candidates running for office, they are often unable to. However, when asked if they recognize the candidates' names, they usually do. They can also then assess the traits of each candidate.

3. Duke was an active neo-Nazi during the high school and college years and was the grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan in 1975. He now asks voters to forget these "tiresome references" to his past and accept him as a candidate for low taxes and less government. (See the November 18, 1991 edition of *Newsweek*.)

4. Since 1974, the number of pieces of franked mail has doubled, and even tripled in given years. The highest
number of mailings was in 1984 when 924.6 million pieces were franked at the cost of $117.3 million (Ornstein 1990, 139 and 160).

5. Such tactics can amount to nothing if a representative of senator takes an opposing position somewhere down the road. Hatch did just that in the Clarence Thomas hearings and his favorable ratings among women dropped overnight.

6. Obviously, a scandal or revelation of improprieties can quickly destroy any candidate's image.

7. Banks and Kiewiet define a weak candidate as one with little or no prior political experience or exposure.

8. Abramowitz later incorporated Congressional Quarterly's 7-point scale, in which congressional districts are ranked as ''Safe Democrat,'' ''Safe Republican,'' or somewhere in between, into his model for determining competitiveness and found that there was virtually no difference in the resulting calculations.

9. See Tod Lindberg's ''Putting Incumbents on Notice,'' in Insight, 8 October, 1990, p. 64.

10. The California measure was contested and subsequently upheld in the Supreme Court (Ornstein 1991a).


12. This argument is supported by the research of Banks and Kiewiet. See page 22.
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