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The Dynamics of Open-Seat Campaigning:
A Case Study of Nevada’s Second Congressional District

by Hilarie Hicks Robison

INTRODUCTION

Americans place great value on their democratic constitutional system, which emphasizes representation of the people. Congressional campaigns go to the very heart of this democratic system in determining who will represent the American people. Consequently, it behooves us to study the processes and theories surrounding election campaigns. These processes and theories will be presented in the following pages as they are placed in context through a detailed case study of a campaign race waged for the United States House of Representatives in 1996. The players are Republican James Gibbons and Democrat Thomas “Spike” Wilson, competing for the open seat in Nevada’s second Congressional District.

HERRNSON’S MODEL

Dr. Paul Herrnson, a distinguished professor and author from the University of Maryland, provides an excellent framework for studying campaigns in his book Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington (1995). The theoretical context for this study is based on Herrnson’s work, not because other writers of merit do not exist, but because other authors focus on incumbent-challenger races, the dynamics of which are quite different from open-seat campaigns. For example, David Mayhew describes advertising, credit-claiming, and position-taking as the three activities in which Congressmen engage (1974). While an excellent analysis, this has only a limited application to candidates not currently holding elected office. As an interesting note, Jim Gibbons’ campaign manager did indicate that their campaign focused more on advertising (achieving name recognition for the candidate) and position-taking rather than credit-claiming (Dayton 1996). This is to be expected for a non-incumbent. Similarly, Richard Fenno’s work on “home style,” the way in which a candidate presents himself to his district, applies primarily to incumbents (1978).

CONFORMATION TO MODEL

Herrnson, however, provides a framework designed specifically for analyzing open-seat campaigns. His model is based on two premises. First, open-seat elections are very competitive; they are nearly always won by much smaller margins than races which involve an incumbent. Second, the two major factors which determine the outcome of an open-seat election include the partisanship of the district and the “skills and resources that candidates and their organizations bring to the campaign” (Herrnson 1995, 216). The two factors outlined in the second premise were indeed the most important in determining the outcome of Nevada’s second Congressional District race. However, this race did not conform to Herrnson’s first premise in being extremely competitive. While the candidates followed Herrnson’s prediction of acquiring nearly equal amounts of money (1995, 218), the race was won by a large margin.

THESIS

Interestingly, the very fact that this race for Nevada’s second district seat conformed to Herrnson’s second premise provides an explanation for its deviation from the first premise. The race between Jim Gibbons and Spike Wilson was won by a large margin precisely because of the party composition of the district and because of the inferiority of the skills and resources, i.e., lack of strategic ambition, that Spike Wilson and his organization brought to the campaign. Due to these two factors, the open-seat race to determine the representative for Nevada’s second Congressional District does not conform entirely to Herrnson’s model. In the pages that follow, the dynamics and intricacies of the campaign, which lead to this conclusion, will be explored.
**The Nevada Second Congressional District**

**Geography and Demographics**

Nevada's second Congressional District was created by reapportionment in 1982. Until that time, all of the state was an at-large district. Geographically, this district encompasses a wide expanse of rural area, taking in nearly the entire state of Nevada, minus only the city of Las Vegas. Although it comprises 99.8 percent of the state's land area (Cook 1996, 31 January), the total district population is only 600,876.

This primarily white population consists of generally lower middle-class families. With 64 percent of voters registered Republican, the NV second is labeled a "likely Republican" district (Cook 1996, 28 August). As recent presidential elections testify, the area is very friendly toward Republicans, but a tough arena for Democrats. In 1988, Bush received 65 percent here; in 1992, Bush received 38, Clinton 33, and Perot 28 percent (Cook 1996, 31 January). Of the seventeen counties represented by the second district, the number of registered Democrats outweigh registered Republicans in only four.

Approximately 55 percent of the district is located in the metropolitan areas of Reno and Carson City, the state capitol; 30 percent is suburban Las Vegas; and the remainder is rural Nevada. Consequently, classic "western state issues" such as mining and grazing laws, as well as an interest unique to Nevada, i.e., gaming, are important. Nevada's second district generally is seen as part of the conservative western bloc, but has little impact nationally.

**Representative Barbara Vucanovich (R, NV)**

Since its creation in 1982, conservative Republican Barbara Vucanovich has represented Nevada's second Congressional District. In December of 1995, while serving her seventh term, Representative Vucanovich announced that she would not seek reelection. Though she received 64 percent of the vote in 1994, 1992 was a different story. In a field of numerous candidates, Vucanovich retained her seat with only 48 percent of the vote (Cook 1996, 31 January). Fear of losing a reelection bid, however, did not evidently affect her decision to retire.

At age 74, Barbara Vucanovich is widely considered the most conservative woman serving in the House. Her pro-life stance serves to alienate Vucanovich from her female colleagues (Cook 1996, 31 January). She also often voted against other "women's issues," such as family and medical leave. A breast cancer survivor, she now counts "good health" among her blessings (White 1995). According to Vucanovich, her decision to retire was based on a desire to spend more time with her family. "It has been a great honor to be here this year working on behalf of Nevadans and serving in the House Republican leadership during this historic Congress. The time has come, however, for me to take off my public service hat so I can spend more time with my husband, George, and my family." (White 1995).

Vucanovich's decision to retire reversed an earlier announcement in June of 1995, that she would seek an eighth term. Vucanovich served as Chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction. She was also elected Secretary of the House GOP Conference. Although Representative Vucanovich belongs to the conservative wing that swept Congress in 1994, her retirement may have been affected by Herron's theory that elections following an upheaval within Congress are marked by a large number of retirements (1995, 33).

**The Primary Race**

Herron's model predicts that an open seat will draw a large number of primary contestants, as well as more money and resources (1995, 17). This was certainly true of the primary elections in Nevada's second district, especially in the Republican party.

**Republican Candidates**

Spurred by Vucanovich's retirement in this Republican district, there was no shortage of qualified, experienced GOP candidates vying for the nomination. As Herron predicts, the race pitted several state elected officials against each other (1995, 46). The GOP roster boasted Vucanovich's own daughter, Patty Cafferata; state
Assemblyman Jim Gibbons; former Secretary of State Cheryl Lau; rural miner Pat Macmillan; Las Vegas attorney Mike Schaefer; stockbroker Hilary Milko; retiree Bob Edwards; and State Treasurer Bob Seale.

As the incumbent’s daughter, Patty Cafferata was expected to have an edge in the race. She was a former Reno assembly member, ex-State Treasurer, unsuccessful candidate for governor in 1986, and currently the district attorney for Lander County. Strongly pro-life, Cafferata labeled herself as “the most conservative of the candidates running” (American Political Network 1996, 8 March). She promised to get government “off the backs of and out of the pockets of citizens” (American Political Network 1996, 8 March).

Jim Gibbons had served in the state Assembly and, as the Republican nominee for governor in 1994, garnered 41 percent of the vote against incumbent Bob Miller. In favor of abortion rights, Gibbons labeled himself a mainstream conservative. Treasurer Bob Seale claimed to be “conservative on fiscal issues” (American Political Network 1996, 8 March). He also favors abortion rights.

In this campaign for the U.S. House, Gibbons’ internal polls, conducted by Wirthlin Worldwide in May of 1996, showed him leading the GOP pack by a margin of more than 40 points against Cafferata and Seale (American Political Network 1996, 8 March). As Herrnson would predict, Gibbons’ early lead in the polls helped to attract substantial campaign funding (1995, 218). Throughout the primary season, Gibbons received more than $265,000 in campaign contributions, compared to Cafferata’s $95,000 and Seale’s $82,000 (FEC 1996, September).

A poll conducted in July by the Las Vegas Review-Journal confirmed Gibbons’ internal findings; he led his Republican primary challengers as well as Democrats (Morrison 1996). Due to the findings of this poll, Bob Seale dropped out of the race, blaming his poor showing in the polls for blocking his fundraising efforts (Morrison 1996). Ironically, he withdrew too late to have his name removed from the ballot and finished fourth in the race with 4 percent of the vote (Vogel 9/4/96).

DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES

The Democratic primary roster was less distinguished, boasting former Virginia City prostitute Jesse Winchester; security guard Mike Martin; and David Ward, a cable TV salesman who dropped out before the primary race. It was not until the last day to file, June 4, that Thomas “Spike” Wilson added his name to the list of candidates for the Democratic primary race.

Wilson, a Reno attorney and “fiscal conservative,” served in the state Senate and on the Nevada Ethics Commission (Morrison 1996). Among the Democrats, he provided the only evidence of political experience or qualifications. Due to his late entry, Wilson had little time to solicit campaign contributions for the primary season, but he did receive over $80,000, which he added to $100,000 of his own money (FEC 1996, September).

THE RESULTS

Nevada’s primary election was held on September 3, 1996. It produced no surprises. Gibbons won the Republican primary with 43 percent of the vote, followed by Cafferata and Lau. In the Democratic primary, Wilson won handily with 62 percent of the votes despite his late entry (Vogel 1996, 4 September). Although Herrnson calls open-seat primaries “the most competitive of all nominating contests” (1995, 46), both Gibbons and Wilson won their primaries by significant margins (20 percent for Gibbons and nearly 40 percent for Wilson). This is additionally surprising in the Republican camp because of the qualifications and experience of the other candidates. Perhaps the wide margin of victory reflects the large differences in the amount of campaign funding each candidate was able to acquire.

THE CANDIDATES

Herrnson submits that the best qualified office-seekers wait until an open seat becomes available rather than face a formidable incumbent (1995, 36). The two candidates for Nevada’s second Congressional District’s open seat could both be considered experienced. Gibbons had the advantage of name recognition from having run a state-wide election previously. (Because the district covers the entire state, campaign-
Wilson's delay in filing his candidacy perhaps illustrates his hesitancy to run as a Democrat in such a conservative district. Though Gibbons was not an incumbent, Wilson may have seen his opponent as a formidable challenge. Ironically, the two men's careers have evolved along similar paths.

**REPUBLICAN JAMES GIBBONS**

A native Nevadan, Jim Gibbons earned his law degree, then became a pilot for Delta Airlines. Previously, he worked as a mining geologist and served in the United States Air Force, experiencing combat duty as a secret-missions pilot in the Vietnam War and voluntarily in the Persian Gulf during Operation Desert Storm. Gibbons, age fifty-one, is proud of his wife, daughter, and two sons, whose pictures he flaunted throughout various campaign literature.

Gibbons served three terms in the Nevada State Assembly, where he authored the popular Gibbons Tax Restraint Initiative. This initiative, requiring all tax increases to be approved by two-thirds of the state legislature, was on the ballot this year and passed quite easily on election night (Morrison and Vogel 1996, 6 November). As the Republican nominee for governor in 1994, Gibbons made this conservative legislation the centerpiece of his campaign (American Political Network 1994, 13 October). Though seen as a conservative Republican, Gibbons was labeled by the Abortion Report as pro-choice (American Political Network 1994, 19 October) and declared that government should not involve itself in the abortion issue (Gibbons and Cafferata 1996).

Gibbons fits the criteria for what Herrnson calls a strategic politician. Candidates who behave strategically possess "a desire to get elected, a realistic understanding of what it takes to win, and an ability to assess the opportunities presented" (Herrnson 1995, 31). Gibbons fits this category because he obviously exercised much thought and preparation in evaluating his candidacy. He announced his candidacy on December 5, 1995, long before any other competitors. With this head start, Gibbons began raising money (and thus spending money) and conducting polls early in the campaign season. As Herrnson illustrates, "a campaign's initial expenditures are particularly influential" in spreading a candidate's name recognition and message (1995, 218). Gibbons achieved this advantage by entering the race early and behaving strategically, while Wilson missed out because he filed his candidacy much later.

**DEMOCRAT THOMAS "SPIKE" WILSON**

Unfortunately, it is necessary to begin here with a disclaimer. Spike Wilson's campaign offices and staff were less than helpful in providing information. Due to their refusal to answer questions and provide campaign literature, the sources used to compile a profile of Spike Wilson and his campaign are quite limited. This difficulty in dealing with the candidate and his campaign suggest that Wilson is not overly personable or helpful, which are qualities heavily associated with casework. Perhaps Wilson's apparent weakness in constituency relations stems from the fact that he knew he was waging a lost-cause campaign. From the beginning, Wilson knew his chances for victory were minimal, but "this is a race that someone had to make...I had a ball" (Wilson quoted in Morrison and Vogel 1996).

Thomas "Spike" Wilson, age sixty-one, was also born and raised in Nevada. He served as a federal prosecutor, then became a partner in a law firm with offices in Reno and Las Vegas. As a Democrat, he served from 1970 until 1986 in the Nevada State Senate, where he claimed to be "fiscally conservative" and "careful with your [constituents'] tax dollars" (Morrison 1996). Wilson helped to create the bipartisan Nevada Commission on Ethics in Government in 1985, and served as its chair from 1989 until 1996. In 1991, he received the Ethics in Government award from Nevada Common Cause (Wilson 1996).

Though a Democrat, Wilson declined to align himself with Clinton and his party in this conservative district. Calling himself the "independent voice for Nevada," Wilson promised that he would not be another "sure" vote for party leaders. "Congress must stop the finger pointing and partisan bickering, and put the very best ideas of both parties to work" (Wilson 1996). Despite Clinton's general popularity nationwide, Wilson evidently realized that, due to the conservative
nature of this district, aligning himself with the president would not be politically profitable.

Although Wilson was politically experienced, having campaigned and held office in the state, it is doubtful whether he behaved strategically in this campaign. Institutionally, strategic politicians examine factors including filing deadlines and campaign finance laws (Herrnson 1995, 31). Wilson seemed to lack understanding regarding both of these factors. He barely met the filing deadline and failed to conform to Federal Election Commission rules requiring a declaration of receipts and contributions (Paxon 1996).

Structural factors involved in strategic ambition include examining the geography and partisan composition of the district (Herrnson 1995, 31). If Wilson did make such an examination, he did not heed the warning signs. The large, sprawling district is Republican-dominated and requires extensive travel and money to spread one’s name and message throughout the district. A poll taken during the primary season indicated that 53 percent of the district’s voters did not even recognize Wilson’s name (Morrison 1996). In contrast with Bob Seale, however, Wilson opted to remain in the race, saying the numbers did not depress him. “I just see room for growth” (Morrison 1996).

Wilson may have focused on national forces, such as Clinton’s likely victory, instead of local circumstances as a strategic politician would (Herrnson 1995, 31). According to Herrnson’s model, a politician behaving strategically would not run in the circumstances Wilson met. On the other hand, our democratic idealism prefers the presence of an opponent with slim chances to a strategic politician in an unopposed race.

**Campaign Finances**

With each successive election year, the amount of money it takes to wage a campaign increases. Many have speculated on the impact such money-centered campaigns have on our democratic system, but here it is necessary only to analyze its effects in the race at hand. As pointed out earlier, Herrnson’s framework predicts that an open seat will attract more money and assistance from individuals, political action committees (PACs), and party committees than will a challenger race (1995, 17). With high political stakes up for grabs in an open seat, many groups find it advantageous to support their candidate of choice. Hence, both Spike Wilson and Jim Gibbons received substantial campaign contributions.

Candidates are required to report the contributions they receive to the Federal Election Commission (FEC), which then makes this information available to the public. In the general election, Jim Gibbons spent nearly $500,000. He received most of his money, close to $400,000, from individual contributors. PACs, primarily those associated with casinos and other businesses, donated approximately $130,000 to the Gibbons campaign (FEC 1996, December).

Although Herrnson’s framework predicts that the party not in control of the presidency (in this case, the Republican party) will use more of its resources to support incumbents (1995, 80), the National Republican Congressional Committee gave the maximum contribution allowed to the Jim Gibbons campaign. After all, the committee’s primary goal is to maximize its party’s seats in Congress, and the Nevada second district seat was “likely Republican” (Cook Political Report 1996, 28 August).

From the beginning of the general election, Gibbons led Wilson in the polls and the lead continued to widen as the election drew closer (American Political Network 1996, 4 October). Given this lead in the polls, Herrnson theorizes that Gibbons will attract more money and resources than Wilson (1995, 218). This proved true in the Nevada second district campaign, but the difference was quite small. Spike Wilson spent approximately $450,000 on the general election (FEC 1996, December).

Wilson received almost $250,000 from individual contributors. Most of his PAC money, totaling over $100,000, was donated by national organizations, such as the Federal Express PAC and the National Education Association PAC, as well as labor organizations. Interestingly, a number of casino corporations that contributed to Gibbons’ campaign also gave money to Spike Wilson (FEC 1996, October and December; Kanigher and McCall 1996). Evidently, these casino PACs exercise access strategies, contributing to both candi-
dates so that they are guaranteed access regardless of who wins the election (Herrnson 1995, 110). Information regarding the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee’s involvement in Wilson’s campaign is unavailable. Despite the integral role that money seems to play in modern elections, it is not always the most important factor. Although Gibbons and Wilson spent similar amounts of money, there was a wide margin between them in the election results. Perhaps voters do see beyond the resources money can buy. Or, as is more likely in this case, party identification is simply more important to voters than how many television ads a candidate can buy.

**ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL**

Numerous factors play a significant role in the outcome of a campaign for office. Obviously, the role of money is very substantial, as has been discussed. Beyond that, however, variables such as campaign organization and staff, priorities made in determining the campaign budget, and campaign strategies, including the issues, themes, and messages which a candidate embraces, are extremely significant. Each of these factors can be used in such a way as to mean the difference between winning and losing an election.

**CAMPAIGN ORGANIZATIONS**

In Herrnson’s model of campaign staff and organizations, incumbents clearly have an advantage with more experienced staff and resources (1995, 63). In the open seat race at hand, however, Herrnson indicates that nonincumbents who have previously held an elected position have an advantage in assembling their campaign organization (1995, 64). Both Gibbons and Wilson held elected posts, but neither of them had an ongoing support club. Their respective organizations, the “Jim Gibbons for Congress Committee,” and “Nevadans for ‘Spike’ Wilson” were both organized specifically for this race. However, it is most likely that each candidate has a tight circle of staunch supporters who have been through other state and local campaigns with him.

Open seat campaigns fall between those waged by challengers and those by incumbents in regard to the professionalization of the staff and organization. The majority are managed by a paid staffer, some have professional media consultants, and most candidates have their polling done by professionals. Other functions, such as press relations, fundraising, and issue research, is often done by volunteers in open seat campaigns (Herrnson 1995, 64-69).

Due to my difficulty in obtaining information from the Wilson campaign, I cannot compare his campaign organization to the model; however, Gibbons’ campaign largely conforms to Herrnson’s pattern for organization. Jim Gibbons’ campaign manager, Mike Dayton, was a paid professional. Wirthlin Worldwide, a well-known and respected firm, conducted several polls for Gibbons. His campaign relied on outside political consultants for some advice on advertising, and the National Republican Congressional Committee provided its research. The rest of Gibbons’ campaign staff was comprised of volunteers, who handled press relations and fundraising (Dayton 1996). The entire Gibbons family was involved in the campaign, especially the candidate’s son, Christopher, age twenty-one, who designed an Internet home page for his father: http://www.gibbons4congress.com.

**CAMPAIGN BUDGETS**

In addition to the organization of campaign staff, the professionalism of a congressional campaign can be judged by how its money is budgeted. In the way they allocate funds, there are virtually no differences among incumbents, challengers, and open-seat candidates. Generally, candidates spend 76 percent of campaign funds in voter communication, 18 percent for overhead expenses, and 6 percent on polling and research. Further breaking down the voter communication percentages, most candidates budget 11 percent of their total funds for radio, 18 percent for television, another 18 percent for direct mail, 4 percent for newspapers, and the remaining 25 percent for field activities. (Herrnson 1995, 73)

As discussed above, this information is not available for the Wilson campaign, and Gibbons’ campaign budget largely does not conform to Herrnson’s model, due primarily to the geographical expanse of Nevada’s 2nd district and some
in-kind donations Gibbons received.

In contrast with the usual 18 percent spent on overhead, Gibbons' campaign manager indicated that their overhead comprised closer to 5 percent of the budget because of numerous in-kind donations. Field activities, including travel, make up only 10 percent of the Gibbons budget. This is surprising in a district where campaigning requires travel throughout the entire state. (Perhaps Gibbons' employment as a pilot for Delta Airlines facilitated this.) Approximately 5 percent was spent on polling, done by Wirthlin Worldwide, and 10 percent on direct mail. In describing open-seat races, Herrnson theorizes that "direct mail has the biggest impact on vote shares, followed by radio and television" (1995, 219). Gibbons' allocation of funds does not exactly fit Herrnson's pattern.

The major discrepancies between Gibbons and the typical campaign are in the amount spent on radio and television advertisements. As is becoming more common every election year, television was the major budgetary item in the campaign. While Gibbons spent only 5 percent of his total budget on radio, a phenomenal 60 percent went toward television (Dayton 1996). These discrepancies may be explained by looking at the different media markets throughout the state. To reach the entire second district, a candidate not only has to adverti?
messages were important in the race for Nevada’s second Congressional District.

In an open seat, Herrnson’s model predicts that candidates will strive to portray themselves as “caring, hard-working, and experienced” (1995, 170). In Nevada’s second district, Jim Gibbons embraced all three attributes quite successfully, while Spike Wilson emphasized his qualifications and what his agenda would be as a member of Congress. While both candidates chose a few issues to emphasize, only Gibbons was successful in portraying a coherent image of himself.

Image. Wilson’s campaign “image” consisted of a picture of himself, the headline “We like Spike,” and the subtitle “the Independent voice for Nevada” (Wilson 1996). As a Democrat in a largely Republican district, he was trying to disassociate himself from the party ticket. Voters were not given the opportunity to meet Spike as a person, even through simple words on paper. A few qualifications were listed, but no family was ever introduced (Spike is divorced), and trustworthiness or caring were not discussed. To some Nevadans, Spike may have come across as a cold politician. With the large party barrier to overcome, this lukewarm portrayal of Spike Wilson’s image was quite a blunder. Evidently, Wilson was attempting to portray a “home style” (Fenno 1978) that focused on experience and a future agenda more than identifying with the people as one of them.

Republican candidate Jim Gibbons scored high points in the portrayal of a consistent, likeable, and comfortable image. He stressed his past record of fighting for Nevadans and filled his campaign literature with pictures of a caring Jim Gibbons reading to children or helping seniors find solutions to their problems (Jim Gibbons, Uncommon 1996). Gibbons also used his role as an Air Force veteran to transmit a certain image of patriotism and honor, saying “I was willing to fight for my country—I’m willing to fight for Nevada” (Jim Gibbons 1995). Both the military and politics are about leadership and public service.

The most consistently-used image, however, was a lovely portrait of Jim with his wife and three children. It was included in every piece of direct mail and many television advertisements. This image of a caring family man essentially became Gibbons’ “home style” (Fenno 1978) and served well as an overarching theme that hit home with numerous voters.

Issues. Spike fared better in presenting his issues than his image. Clearly, this Democrat understood the importance of alienating himself from the Clinton/Gore ticket in this district. Stressing his independence, Spike promised not to be “another sure vote for the leaders of either party” (Wilson 1996). His primary issue focus was on families. Despite his promise to be an independent voice, Spike jumped on the national bandwagon in calling for tax credits for child care and education, health insurance access and portability, and pay and pension equity for working women (Wilson 1996).

These family issues did not exactly play out as Wilson’s trump card, however. Wilson simply talked about helping families, while Gibbons portrayed it in action. As it is said, a picture is worth a thousand words; or a thousand votes, as the case may be. Wilson also talked about “ending corporate welfare” through changes in tax policy and achieving political reform through tough ethics (Wilson 1996).

Jim Gibbons’ focus on a few broad issues further helped him achieve coherence as he repeated his message in every ad and leaflet. Gibbons followed Herrnson’s model in identifying himself with valence issues (Herrnson 1995, 170). He took policy stands on protecting seniors and veterans, cracking down on crime, and improving education—issues which generate little controversy and draw large support. While he outlined specific policy goals, Gibbons continually emphasized the broader valence issues. Gibbons also campaigned on the issue of tax restraint, echoing the initiative he authored that was passed at the same time he was elected to Congress. In this Republican district, Gibbons did not shie away from the Dole-Kemp national ticket and openly supported Dole’s plan for a 15 percent across-the-board tax cut (Vogel 1996, 27 October). Wilson opposed any tax cut until Congress balances the budget (Vogel 1996, 27 October).

During the primary campaign, Gibbons addressed a wider array of issues, especially emphasizing classic states’ rights in claiming that the “federal government is too heavy-handed” (Henley 1996), and therefore we should “let Nevadans
run Nevada” (Chris Gibbons, Jim’s Stand 1996). In issues regarding Nevada’s mining and ranching interests, Gibbons claimed that the federal government has been “waging war on the west” (Henley 1996), in preventing Nevada from controlling its own state land. True to his party, Wilson favored leaving Nevada’s lands in the hands of the federal government. Gibbons also argued in favor of popular national issues, such as balancing the federal budget, welfare reform, and revamping Medicare (Chris Gibbons, Jim’s Stand 1996). However, all of these issues faded into the background during the general election campaign in favor of those discussed above.

In the Wilson campaign, issues were used more extensively than images. Gibbons also focused on issues, but his family picture, so prevalent throughout the campaign, seemed to be the overriding theme. Perhaps due to the large and diverse nature of the district, both candidates steered away from local concerns, (which have the potential to arouse opposing viewpoints in the urban and rural areas) to embrace larger issues. Gibbons’ family portrait served as a universal theme, striking chords in this area largely populated by traditional families. Also due to the district’s extensive geographic area, Gibbons and Wilson were required to travel and campaign throughout the state, walking the neighborhoods everywhere from Elko to Las Vegas. Out of necessity, both candidates maintained offices and campaign personnel in Reno as well as Las Vegas.

NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING

This congressional race was clouded by very little negative campaigning. The candidates participated in seven debates together and remained civil in each one (Vogel 1996, 27 October). Both Gibbons’ and Wilson’s television campaign advertisements remained relatively positive, but a couple of incidences are noteworthy.

In particular, the Nevada Republican Party published a pamphlet attacking Spike Wilson’s history of voting in favor of raising taxes on Nevada citizens. According to their campaign literature, Wilson voted to raise his legislative salary and perks twelve times and to raise taxes and fees over three hundred times while serving in the state senate. Telling the “real story about Spike Wilson,” they labeled him as an out-of-touch politician (NV Republican Party 1996).

In the last weeks of the campaign, Wilson accused Gibbons of “attack ads” and Gibbons tried to paint Wilson as a Clinton liberal (Morrison and Vogel 1996). Discussing Clinton’s interventions in Iraq, the two candidates got their hands a little muddy. Wilson bordered on calling Gibbons, a veteran of two wars, unpatriotic (Vogel 1996, 19 September).

AND THE WINNER IS.....

The results of the general election held on November 5, 1996, like those of the primary, were not unexpected. They were in line with results indicated in earlier polls (Morrison 1996; American Political Network 1996, 30 May). For the open seat in Nevada’s second Congressional District, Republican Jim Gibbons won with 58 percent of the vote. Gibbons beat Democrat Spike Wilson, who garnered 36 percent of the vote, by a margin greater than 20 percentage points (Morrison and Vogel 1996).

In order to explain the outcome of this race, there are several relevant factors to address. These include the types and groups of voters which supported each candidate, the national context in which the race took place, and the party identification within the district. Also, it is interesting to explore the explanation given by the losing candidate.

Gibbons was supported throughout the race and in his victory by traditionally conservative Republican groups, such as the National Rifle Association and Citizens for Responsible Government, as well as business-related associations like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. These groups endorsed Jim Gibbons, as did other local and state associations (Chris Gibbons, Endorsements 1996; Vogel 1996, 27 October). Also, retiring Representative Barbara Vucanovich endorsed Gibbons in the general campaign (after he defeated her daughter in the primary), calling him “a man of integrity, decency, and a sense of compassion” (NV Republican Party 1996).

Wilson also had numerous supporters and endorsements, especially from state and local unions, such as the Nevada AFL-CIO, the Nevada State Education Association,
and the Service Employees International Union Local 1864 (Vogel 1996, 27 October). An obvious difference is the national scope of the groups which supported Gibbons versus the local nature of Spike’s supporters. National groups like the NRA have a broader membership and more money with which they can support the candidate. This gave Gibbons an edge in the campaign and demonstrates the power of endorsement as a resource.

The population segments which voted for Gibbons and Wilson mirror the types of groups and associations which supported each candidate. Republicans overwhelmingly chose Gibbons, as did many Independents and some Democrats. Many Democrats toed the party line in voting for Spike, but they were simply outnumbered by registered Republicans in the district (Dayton 1996). Clearly, this race is a good example of party politics.

Although redistricting was not a factor in this race, the presence of a presidential election did play a role. As Herrnson points out, presidential election years spur a larger turnout of voters (1995, 17). Such years also have a potential for coattail effects, but these were not realized in the Nevada second district race nor throughout the nation. In the case at hand, Clinton’s coattails may have been replaced by those of Representative John Ensign of Nevada’s first Congressional District.

Ensign, a staunch Republican, served as a freshman in the 104th Congress and retained his seat by a huge margin of victory in 1996. Ensign has been very popular with casino magnates as well as the general populace, so the several public appearances he made with Gibbons may have brought in more money and votes for the second district candidate (see Morrison and Vogel 1996; Vogel 1996, 4 September).

The most important factor in determining the outcome of this race was undoubtedly the party cue. Herrnson’s theory includes explanations for voting decisions. One of these explanations is that voters will choose the candidate with whose political party they identify themselves. This party cue “also enables voters to speculate about a candidate’s ideological orientation and issue positions” (Herrnson 1995, 159). In Nevada’s second district, the Republican party, and hence Jim Gibbons, had a clear advantage based on party cue voting.

Neither Jim Gibbons nor Spike Wilson was surprised by the outcome of the race. In line with Herrnson’s theory that winners attribute their success to image and issues (1995, 219), Gibbons credited his victory to his past experience and issue positions. Although it is natural for Spike to be disappointed, he knew from the beginning that for him this race was basically a lost cause (Morrison and Vogel 1996). As discussed earlier, he knew his chances were very slim and thus he did not put forth the effort necessary to be competitive; i.e., Spike did not behave strategically. Hence, Herrnson’s model that shows the losing candidate placing blame and obsessing about money (1995, 219) does not apply here. Spike Wilson did not blame anyone for his defeat, instead positioning himself almost as a martyr for the democratic system. Spike can be seen as a candidate who entered the race simply to provide an element of opposition, without any real hope of personal victory.

**CONCLUDING ANALYSIS**

In Herrnson’s model, open-seat races are characterized by their intense competition. Yet at no time on election night (or throughout the campaign season) was this race “too close to call.” What explains the deviation in this race from Herrnson’s theory? There are two reasons that the race for Nevada’s second Congressional District was won by 22 percentage points instead of the small margin predicted by Herrnson. First, the majority of voters in the district identified themselves as Republicans, which was a heavy weight in favor of Gibbons. Second, Wilson did not behave as a strategic politician. Spike’s delay in filing his candidacy, his mistakes in reporting to the FEC, and his weakness in constituent relations (casework), because he saw his campaign as a lost cause, all point to this conclusion. Herrnson predicts that only strategic politicians will be successful; Spike was not strategic, so the race was not highly competitive and he lost by a wide margin.

This study of an open-seat race in Nevada’s second Congressional District, in the context of Herrnson’s frame-
work and the 1996 election, provides insight into the elements that are necessary to wage a successful campaign. Such a campaign is an example of the very processes that are integral to our American democratic constitutional system.

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