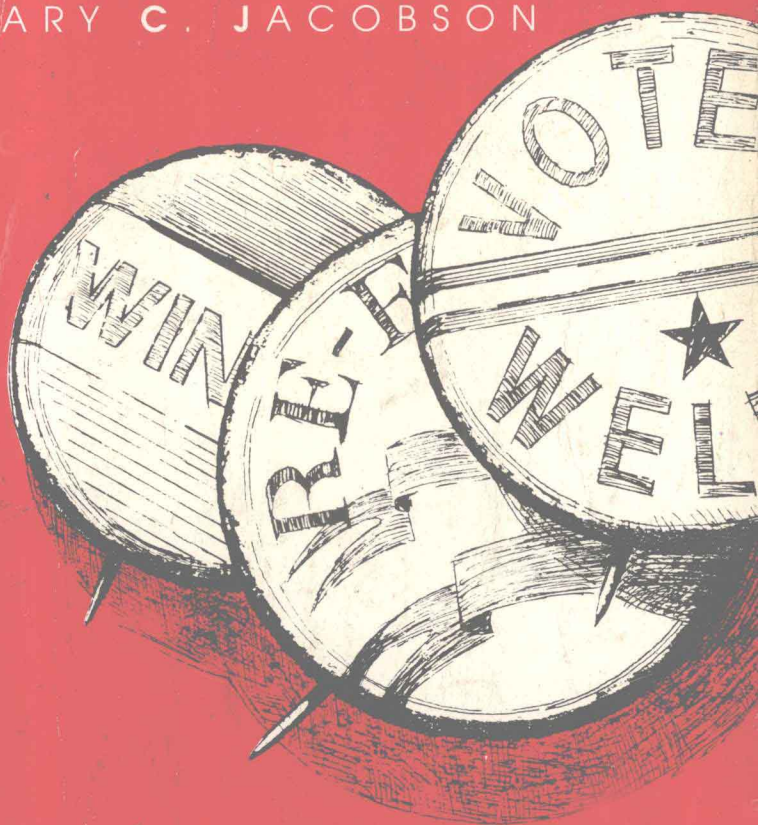


The
POLITICS
of
CONGRESSIONAL
ELECTIONS

THIRD EDITION
GARY C. JACOBSON



THE POLITICS OF CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

THIRD EDITION

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University of California, San Diego



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For Marty and Karen

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Preface

This book, like the first two editions, is about congressional election politics, broadly understood. In writing it, I have tried to keep in mind that elections are means, not ends in themselves. What happens during campaigns or on election days is, of course, fascinating and important, and I do not neglect congressional candidates, campaigns, and voters. But campaigns and elections are more than curious rituals only because they reflect deeper structural patterns and currents in American political life and help determine how—and how well—we are governed. A considerable part of the book is therefore devoted to tracing the connections between the electoral politics of Congress and other important political phenomena. Examining congressional election politics in this way inevitably raises fundamental questions about representation and responsibility, and these are the central normative concerns of the book. My intent here, then, is to offer a systematic account of what goes on in congressional elections and to show how electoral politics reflect and shape other basic components of the political system, with profound consequences for representative government.

I was again happy to discover in preparing this edition that research on congressional elections continues to thrive, and, as before, it will quickly become clear to the reader how much I have learned from the work and ideas of other scholars. Information on congressional voters, candidates, and campaign finances becomes richer with each passing election as well; in 1988, a national election study focusing specifically on Senate elections was inaugurated. These developments, along with the fascinating if not always edifying politics that sustain and reflect divided partisan control of the federal government, continue to make thinking and writing about the politics of congressional elections an intellectual pleasure.

I remain deeply indebted to the many friends and colleagues who have guided and stimulated my thinking about congressional election politics. The genesis of this book was my work as a member of the Committee on Congressional Election Research of the Board of Overseers of National Election Studies (NES), which designed the congressional component included in American National Election Studies since 1978. Everyone I worked with on the committee has contributed to it in some way: Alan Abramowitz, David Brady, Heinz Eulau, Richard Fenno, John Ferejohn, Morris Fiorina, Barbara Hinckley, Malcolm Jewell, Jack Katosh, James Kuklinski, Thomas Mann, David Mayhew, Warren Miller, Glenn Parker, Barbara Sinclair, Michael Traugott, Raymond Wolfinger, and Gerald Wright.

Since then, a continuing association with the NES Board has helped keep me in touch with other scholars who have contributed in various ways to my understanding of congressional elections and politics: Richard Brody, Stanley Feldman, William Flanigan, Edie Goldenberg, Stanley Kelley, Rod Kiewiet, Donald Kinder, Douglas Rivers, Steven Rosenstone, Merrill Shanks, Walter Stone, and Mark Westlye, and John Zaller. I also wish to thank the many political scientists who used the two editions in their teaching and have let me know what they liked and disliked about them.

I am grateful to all of my colleagues at the University of California, San Diego, for providing an environment wonderfully conducive to scholarly work. Samuel Kernell read and commented on several chapters and has shared some of the research reported in the book. I have also enjoyed instructive and stimulating conversations with Nathaniel Beck, Peter Cowhey, Gary Cox, David Laitin, John Mendeloff, Mathew McCubbins, and Samuel Popkin. Morris Fiorina, Herbert Jacob, Burdett Loomis, Thomas Mann, and Steven Rosenstone read the entire manuscript of the first edition, and their service continues to register in this one. Jon Bond, Priscilla Southwell, Darrell West, David T. Canon, Larry Elowitz, and James B. Strandberg reviewed previous editions with an eye to improving this one; the book is clearly better for their suggestions (and perhaps the worse for my not having heeded more of them). I am obliged to Denise Gimlin, Edward Lazarus, Del Powell, and David Wilsford for helping to gather some of the data analyzed in Chapter 6, and to Jim Glaser for some of the data used in Tables 5.2, 5.3, and 5.6.

Part of the research reported here was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation (SES-80-7577), for which I am most

grateful. Some of the data used in this book were made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. The data for the 1978, 1980, 1982, and 1984, 1986, and 1988 American National Election Studies were originally collected by the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research, the University of Michigan, under a grant from the National Science Foundation. Neither the original collectors of the data nor the consortium bear any responsibility for the analyses and interpretations presented here, and the same, of course, holds for anyone else I have mentioned.

I completed the manuscript for this edition during my first few months as a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences on the campus of Stanford University. I cannot imagine a better place to write and think, and I am grateful to the Center's director, Philip Converse, and to its friendly and highly efficient staff for creating such a congenial working environment and for financial support provided by the National Science Foundation #BN-870064.

GARY C. JACOBSON

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Chapter

1

Introduction

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

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

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

to grasp the deeper role of congressional elections in the political process.

To explain what goes on in congressional elections and to understand how they are connected in myriad ways to other aspects of American political life are the broad purposes of this book. It also has a more pointed intention: to use a careful examination of the complex, multifaceted business of electing Congress to help understand why politicians in Washington have found it so difficult to fashion measured solutions to pressing national problems. One of my central arguments is that political incapacity and stalemate are encouraged by a peculiar shortcoming of contemporary congressional election processes: They give us representatives and senators who are individually responsive but collective irresponsible.

It is by no means a simple story. Consider these curious conjunctions:

Public faith in political institutions and leaders declined sharply between the 1960s and the 1980s;¹ during the same period, the average vote received by incumbent members of the House of Representatives grew from 60 to 68 percent. Disdain for Congress does not preclude warm regard for its individual members.² Put another way, politicians may succeed even though policies fail.

Even though members increased their average margin of victory between the mid-1960s the mid-1980s, they did not increase their chance of winning until the late 1980s.

Members of Congress are better educated, harder working, better staffed, with more resources than ever before; yet the Congress often seems more ineffectual than ever.

The Democrats have controlled the House of Representatives since 1955; a Republican has lived in the White House for two-thirds of that time. Divided control of the federal government was very rare in the 50 years before World War II; it is now the norm.

1 Warren E. Miller and Santa Traugott, *American National Election Studies Data Sourcebook, 1952-1986* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 261-266.

2 To paraphrase Richard F. Fenno, Jr. See his "If, as Ralph Nader Says, Congress Is 'the Broken Branch,' How Come We Love Our Congressmen So Much?" in *Congress in Change: Evolution and Reform*, ed. Norman J. Ornstein (New York: Praeger, 1975), pp. 227-281.

Fewer people now vote, even though the impact of government on people is greater and more people share the social characteristics associated with voting than ever before.

Many of these developments are examined more thoroughly in the pages that follow. Ultimately I argue that they are complementary rather than contradictory. They serve at this point to raise questions and suggest themes to be pursued. They also begin to alert us to the range and complexity of interlocking issues that must be dealt with in any thorough account of congressional elections.

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

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

People involved in congressional elections are at least implicitly aware of the connections between the different levels of analysis. Voters are interested primarily in the candidates and campaigns in their state or district, but at least some are conscious of the broader,