Choosing The Congress

Congressional Elections and the Fate of the Obama Agenda

- By mid-January Brown had closed the gap and soon pulled ahead. During the last week of the campaign he was raising a million dollars a day over the Internet.
- But national factors as well as personal and local factors clearly contributed to Coakley's defeat.

The Electoral Evolution of the Congress

- Madison wrote that the House should have "an immediate dependence on, and an intimate sympathy with, the people."
- According to Madison, the Senate would proceed "with more coolness, with more system, and with more wisdom, than the popular branch."
- Turnover levels often were as high as 50 percent until after the Civil War.
- Moreover, the national government was not particularly important in the early years of the republic. Many members found that they had less power in Washington then they would have in the capital cities of their home states. Even those members willing to serve multiple terms sometimes were prevented from doing so by *rotation* practices, whereby a congressional district's political factions "took turns" holding the congressional seat. Abraham Lincoln, for example, was elected to the House in 1846 but stepped down after one term in accordance with local rotation agreements.
- Although they had the opportunity to stay longer than members of the House, many senators chose to pass it up for the same reasons that House members went home.
- Congress is the world's foremost example of what political scientists call a professional legislature. Its members are full-time legislators who serve for long periods. In fact, many people in the United States think that the memberships of Congress is too *stable*.
- The explanation for this apparent contradiction is simple: Contemporary members of Congress win so often precisely *because* they are so electorally aware—they anticipate threats to their reelection and act to avoid them.

Reapportionment and Redistricting

- After the census, the 435 seats in the House of Representatives are apportioned among the states according to their population—a process called reapportionment. In the past half-century, northeastern and upper Midwestern states have lost more than 60 House seats to southern and southwestern states as population has shifted from the Frostbelt to the Sunbelt.
- After the other states learn how many House seats they have received, they set to work redistricting—drawing the boundaries of the new districts. Congressional districts within individual states once varied widely in population, but now they must be of virtually equal population, the result of Supreme Court decisions beginning with *Wesberry v. Sanders* in 1964.
- This principle has come to be known as "one person, one vote."
- In 2008, for example, less than half as many people voted in some New York City districts as voted in some suburban districts.

- In 2010, for example, more than 7.5 million people voted in the California Senate election, compared to a little more than 230,000 in the North Dakota election.
- Charges of gerrymandering—drawing the boundary lines of congressional districts for partisan or other political advantage—fly back and forth.
- In most other democracies, the redistricting process is far more politically insulated than in the United States.

<u>The Congressional Nomination Process</u>

- The congressional nomination process is much simpler than the presidential one: Nominees for the House or Senate must win at most one primary election in their state, not a sequence across many states.
- Other states hold them at different time and/or under different rules.
- The dates of filing deadlines and primary elections also vary widely across states.
- The hardest fought primaries occur when there is an open seat, a House or Senate race with no incumbent (because of death or retirement) running for reelection.
- When incumbents run, however, they seldom lose in the primary: Indeed, they rarely face tough challenges from other members of their party. This fact does not necessarily show that primaries are unimportant; rather, it may indicate that incumbents usually are very good about keeping members of their own party satisfied, thus discouraging a strong primary challenge. In 2006, for example, only one incumbent senator—Democrat Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut—was defeated in a party primary. Although Lieberman ran as an independent and won the general election, his loss in the Democratic primary sent a clear signal to every other senator in his party (and many representatives as well): Any Democrat who supported the war in Iraq did so at his or her own peril.

<u>Contemporary House Elections</u>

- One reason is that members of Congress are only *collectively* responsible for the state of the nation, whereas the president is considered *individually* responsible. For example, presidents regularly take the blame for a poor economy, but it is unlikely (and hardly reasonable) that voters will hold their representative—who is only one of 435—responsible for the condition of the national economy.
- Another reason why House and presidential elections differ is that in presidential elections the candidates compete on a roughly equal footing.
- The first problems most challengers face is low visibility.
- Having little information on which to base their vote, many people simply go by the "brand name," voting for the candidate of the party with which they generally sympathize. In House elections, three-fourths of all voters who identify with a party typically support the House candidate with the same affiliation. Given that the great majority of House districts are drawn to favor one party or the other, party-line voting largely determines the winners in such "safe seats."
- Statistical studies of House elections show that, other things being equal, the incumbency advantage—the electoral benefit a candidate enjoys by being an incumbent, over and above his

or her other personal and political characteristics—grew from about 2 percentage points before 1960 to as high as 12 points in some late-twentieth-century elections.

- At least five factors contributed to these trends: the decline of political parties in the mid-twentieth century, the expanding resources available to incumbents, change in the importance of "representative" activities, campaign funding disparities, and more responsive incumbents.

<u>Party Decline</u>

- When party affiliations weakened, more voters became "available," willing to vote on other less partisan bases such as the incumbent's personal characteristics and activities. Realizing that more voters now were "up for grabs," incumbents adjusted their behavior.
- They voted themselves resources (often called perks for "perquisites of office") that could make up for those no longer provided by party organizations.

<u>Expanding Member Resources</u>

- In contrast, by 1980 some observers compared members of Congress to CEOs (chief executive officers) of small businesses.
- The typical House member employs 18 personal staff assistants, more than 40 percent of whom are assigned to districts offices.
- Travel subsidies and other perks also expanded greatly.
- Improvements in transportation made it possible for members of Congress to commute, so Congress authorized the funds to support that change.
- Use of the frank—the free use by senators and representatives of the U.S. mail for official business—has also grown.
- Although new technologies have great potential for communicating information about legislation to constituents, thus far House offices appear to be using them mostly to advertise their members.

<u>Change in Importance of "Representative" Activities</u>

- You may think of members of Congress primarily as *lawmakers*.
- But the official title of Congress members of the House is *Representative*, and, as political scientists have long recognized, members view their job much more broadly than just writing and voting on legislation. One activity that occupies a great deal of their time and effort is district service—making sure that their congressional districts get a fair share (or more) of federal programs, projects, expenditures. Although critics of Congress often deride such benefits as "pork barrel spending," constituencies generally approve when their representatives and senators "bring home the bacon"—and reward them at the ballot box for their successes.
- Another activity to which modern representatives devote a great deal of attention is constituent assistance, usually called casework.
- In overwhelming numbers, these constituencies report satisfactory resolution of their problems and, again, show their gratitude at the polls.