Strategic Politicians and U.S. House Elections, 1874–1914

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One of the most fundamental changes in post-World War II congressional elections has been the rise of candidate-centered campaigns. This phenomenon has given rise to considerable theoretical and empirical literature demonstrating the strategic behavior of congressional candidates. Yet very few scholars have assessed the effect or existence of strategic candidate behavior for the pre-World War II era. We seek to fill part of this void by exploring the extent to which experienced or quality candidates played a role in influencing the electoral fortunes of incumbent House members in elections spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Our findings suggest that in terms of strategic emergence and electoral performance, congressional candidates exhibited patterns of behavior which are strikingly similar to those seen in modern-day campaigns, suggesting that individual ambition is the best explanation for candidate behavior in both eras.

While congressional elections span the existence of the republic, our scholarly knowledge of them is heavily skewed toward the post-World War II era. As a result, we can speak with little authority concerning the robustness of many contemporary theories of congressional elections in an historical context. For instance, what role did challenger quality play in electoral politics in this era before the development of candidate-centered campaigns? Did the separation of congressional and presidential campaign committees lead to divergent outcomes within districts? Did "vulnerable" incumbents attract high-quality challengers more often than safe incumbents? Did the adoption of the Australian ballot alter the strategic context of House elections? A closer examination of these questions should yield important insights into the underlying strategic dimension of congressional elections in both the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This paper provides a measure of balance to this body of knowledge by exploring the role of congressional candidates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century congressional elections. In particular, we examine the applicability of ambition theory (Kernell 1977; Rohde 1979; Schlesinger 1966) in explaining outcomes of congressional elections in this era. We focus specifically on the elec-

tions of 1874, 1884, 1894, 1896, 1904, and 1914 to evaluate the extent to which strategic politicians played a role in the aggregate outcome of six somewhat distinct elections. While three of the six elections (1874, 1894, and 1896) were characterized by considerable electoral volatility, the remaining three elections (1884, 1904, and 1914) resulted in far less turnover and electoral instability.

The organization of the paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we discuss the benefits of studying elections over time, the applicability of the Jacobson and Kernell strategic politicians theory to elections in an historical context, and lay out a more general theory of strategic behavior in congressional elections. Section three presents the historical context of the six elections included in our analysis. Section four describes the data and methods of our study, section five offers some important summary evidence, while section six presents results from our multivariate analysis. In the final section, we conclude with implications of our findings and discuss possible extensions to our analysis.

Studying Elections Over Time

While the importance of strategic politicians in the post-World War II era is well documented (Jacobson 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1981), to this point we have a much more limited understanding of the effect of strategic politicians in an historical context. Until recently, the received wisdom concerning nineteenth and early twentieth century congressional elections emphasized their lack of importance. Indeed, Jacobson argues that in a noncandidate centered era, "the quality of individual candidates would be of small electoral consequence" (1989, 787). However, this received wisdom is based more on anecdotal accounts and post-World War II data than on systematic application of modern-day theories, and cannot be evaluated with post World War II data. There are a number of reasons why we might not expect contemporary theories to contribute to our understanding of late nineteenth and early twentieth century congressional elections. Modern-day developments such as legislative careerism, televised congressional sessions, professional staff, efficient travel, and weakened electoral parties have contributed to a rise in "candidate-centered" campaigns and the development of plebiscitary politics within Congress (Jacobson 1989; Smith, Roberts, and Vander Wielen 2003).

Similarly, factors such as the predominance of presidential elections, the party ballot, and the lack of voter information supposedly combined to suppress the salience of congressional elections and candidates (Jacobson 1990). Nineteenth-century congressional elections were, to be sure, quite different from modern-day elections. First, in this time period ballots were often produced by parties. Voters arriving at the polls would find a party representative with stacks of ballots containing the choice of the party for every office on the ballot (Bensel 2003). The party ballot made it much more difficult for voters to choose candidates of different parties for different offices and suppressed the ability of members of the House to develop a "personal vote" with their constituents.

Second, candidate recruitment practices were also markedly different. Before the advent of the direct primary, candidates for the House were chosen by party caucuses (Dallinger 1897; Ostrogorski 1964). As Swenson (1982) notes, these caucuses were often dominated by state and local party machines, who wanted candidates who were both loyal to the party machine and able to recruit more followers for the party. This produced candidates who were not necessarily experts in national policy, but who had demonstrated, often through prior elective office, loyalty to the party machine and "skill in the management of men" (Swenson 1982).

State and local party organizations did more than simply recruit candidates for office during the latter half of the nineteenth century. According to Silbey (1991), local party organizations played an important role in terms of facilitating candidates' election to local, state, or national office: they mobilized supporters and the party faithful to turn out on election day, they developed organizations at all levels (local, state, and national) to facilitate the party's agenda, and they maintained a well-oiled party machine. Additionally, Silbey contends that "party newspapers were the linchpins of the whole system" (1991, 54). Although party organizations varied from state to state and were not uniformly coordinated at the national level, the local party organizations recognized that they were working largely toward the same goal of electing like-minded politicians to local, statewide, and national offices. Finally, unlike modern times, most members did not see service in the House as a career (Kernell 1977; Struble 1979). Faced with multiple qualified candidates for the House, parties often implemented "rotation" whereby one candidate would gain the nomination for one or two terms and then would be forced to relinquish the party mantle to the chief rival who had been denied the nomination before.

Despite these differences, there is reason to believe that late nineteenth and early twentieth century politicians would be affected by similar strategic parameters such as likelihood of victory, value of the seat, and opportunity costs that are faced by modern-day candidates.[1] Indeed, there is no reason to suspect that individual ambition would be tempered by the historical context of congressional elections—regardless of whether prospective candidates have to seek the approval of the party machine or emerge through a direct primary—the goal is to run when one can maximize the probability of victory (Kernell 1977; Rohde 1979; Schlesinger 1966). Further, the available evidence on the role of congressional campaign committees in the nineteenth century (Kolodny 1998) suggests that parties understood the importance of congressional elections in terms of their influence on the institutional makeup of Congress. Kolodny argues persuasively that party leaders in Congress established and maintained congressional campaign committees apart from the presidential campaign committee as early as the

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[1] A similar pattern may hold for the pre-Civil War era as well. However, that time period is beyond the scope of this analysis. For earlier evidence of an electoral connection, see Bianco, Spence, and Wilkerson (1996) and Carson and Engstrom (n.d.).

1860s, in order to control and disseminate information about congressional party positions and to prevent being subsumed by presidential campaigns.

Additionally, the presence of high-profile party leaders on congressional campaign committees suggests the perceived importance of the committees in helping parties attain majority status by actively recruiting and campaigning for experienced candidates. Kolodny notes that House speaker Joseph Cannon went on the road prior to the 1904 elections to campaign for House candidates in "doubtful" districts, with the Republicans eventually winning all but one of the seats that Cannon visited (47). The nature of the American electorate was also evolving during this era. Kolodny suggests that the increasing literacy rate among the electorate led to a change in campaign style as voters began to demand information rather than "flowery oratory." It is certainly plausible that increasingly literate and informed voters would be influenced by the quality of the campaign messenger, and unlikely that party leaders such as Cannon would undergo such an arduous task as canvassing the countryside for congressional candidates if national conditions were the primary determinant of election outcomes. This suggests that the parties thought the quality of congressional campaigns was an important determinant of aggregate election outcomes.

Even prior to the emergence of candidate-centered elections in the twentieth century, changes to the electoral system in the nineteenth century may have made it easier for ambitious politicians to influence election outcomes in the House. Indeed, Rusk (1970), Kernell (1977), and Katz and Sala (1996) have all shown that electoral accountability was greatly enhanced by the adoption of the Australian ballot in the early 1890s. In particular, the advent of the secret ballot had a profound effect on the electoral environment by giving voters a greater opportunity to punish or reward incumbents individually (Katz and Sala 1996, 21) while also giving incumbents the institutional means to develop a "personal vote" (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1992). Additionally, research by Bianco, Spence, and Wilkerson (1996) and Carson et al. (2001) suggests that an "electoral connection" and a personal vote existed even during the pre-Australian ballot era, thus making the quality of the challenger an important factor in congressional races as early as the mid-nineteenth century. Further, in this time period legislative redistricting had not yet become the decennial incumbency protection act it has today, meaning that more seats should have been "in play" than we see in modern day elections (Cox and Katz 2002; Engstrom 2003).

We think that the combination of these factors suggests that the dynamics facing congressional candidates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are similar to those faced by modern-day candidates. As Bianco, Spence, and Wilkerson note, "It is one thing to argue that a congressional career was less attractive or less feasible in an earlier time than it is today, but another to conclude that members of the early Congress were unconcerned about the electoral consequences of their behavior" (1996, 147). Thus we think the strategic politicians theory—as posited by Jacobson and Kernell (1981)—may well be applicable in this historical context. Jacobson and Kernell argue that strategic

politicians play a pivotal role in determining the results of both district-level elections and the overall partisan composition of Congress. More specifically, they demonstrate that quality candidates (e.g., those with previous electoral experience) seek office when national as well as local conditions favor their candidacy as well as their party. As a result, strategic decisions by congressional candidates, based on factors such as likelihood of victory, value of the seat, and opportunity costs, both reflect and enhance national partisan tides. National parties demonstrate strategic behavior as well, providing campaign resources such as campaign appearances and contributions to quality candidates running in competitive elections.

When considering the factors affecting congressional elections and strategic politicians, Jacobson and Kernell (1981) present very clear theoretical expectations regarding strategic challenger emergence. In particular, they maintain that the outcome of congressional races can be strongly influenced by the number of experienced candidates running in a given election year and their distribution across competing parties. Incumbents who face a quality challenger, for instance, are less likely to win than those legislators who do not face a challenger with previous elective experience.[2] Additionally, quality candidates are more likely to win when they run in an open seat with no incumbent seeking reelection, when they run against a "weak" incumbent involved in a scandal or ethical misconduct, or when national tides are favorable to their party. Indeed, Jacobson and Kernell (1981, 34) posit that strategic decisions on the part of experienced challengers are the primary means through which national conditions influence aggregate election outcomes. However, Jacobson (1990) concludes that the importance of strategic politicians in congressional races has grown in tandem with the gradual emergence of candidate-centered politics since the post-war era.

While we do not question that the importance of strategic politicians and the emergence of candidate-centered politics are related for the post-war era, we think there is good reason to suspect a similar pattern of strategic emergence in all time periods, even without the presence of candidate-centered campaigns. Thus, while we may see patterns of strategic behavior in keeping with the strategic politicians theory, we think the mechanism through which this behavior occurs is the strategic calculation of ambitious politicians and parties and is not necessarily a function of candidate-centered campaigns. Political parties have an incentive to maximize the quality of candidates running under their label at all times, but should have an easier time convincing experienced candidates to seek election when the combination of national and local conditions make success more likely. Further, prior to the advent of the direct primary, political parties could prevent weak candidates from seeking election under the party label. As Ostrogorski (1964: 196) notes, "Being aware of the fact that the [party] machine holds the keys of the electoral situation . . . The candidates of the party are the first to

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[2] In his subsequent analysis, Jacobson (1989, 781) finds that experienced candidates are nearly four times as likely to defeat incumbents as candidates without prior elective experience.

realize that they are not at liberty to attain their object independently of the Machine and still less in opposition to it" (1994, 196).[3]

Thus we think it is important that we test the predictive power of ambition theory in an historical context. If in fact candidate quality has an independent effect on election outcomes in a noncandidate centered era, this would suggest that ambition theory is not tempered by a party-dominated electoral process. Further, such a finding would lead us to question the modern-day conclusion that the importance of candidate quality has grown in the modern era because of the rise of candidate-centered elections. Our six-election sample allows us to assess elections spanning a 40-year period, both presidential and midterm election years, elections occurring before, after, and during the realignment of 1896, and elections with considerable variance in member turnover.[4]

Historical Context

Following the Civil War and the era of Reconstruction, vast changes in the economic and political climate of the United States abounded. With the rapid onset of industrialization, particularly in the North, one began to see a shift away from the traditional agrarian system of the past to a new system characterized by an industrial economy. By the 1890s, the U.S. Census revealed that more Americans resided and worked in urban, industrialized areas than those making a living in the agrarian sector. At the same time, the influx of European immigrants into many of the larger cities across the nation resulted in a very unstable economic situation, manifested in a shortage of jobs and a growing disparity between the capitalist and laboring classes (Friedman and Schwartz 1971).

Economic instability also contributed to political volatility during the latter part of the nineteenth century as a result of gradual deflation that was accompanied by steadily declining commodity prices (Friedman and Schwartz 1971). Controversy over tariff policy also contributed to political turmoil, with the Republicans clearly favoring protectionism while the Democrats promoted free

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[3] In fact we might expect to see more high-quality challengers in a party-centered era due to the fact that parties had complete control over their ballots.

[4] In examining elections in this time period we sought to choose a sample that was representative of elections in this period. This was complicated by the large number of moving parts in elections during this era. We see the gradual decline in the practice of rotation in office, the replacement of the party ballot with the Australian ballot, the party realignment of the 1890s, a gradual shift to the direct primary, and a gradual increase in legislative careerism. Thus in attempting to select representative elections we were chasing a moving target. As such, we selected elections that reflected the diversity of the time period. We have elections before and after the adoption of the Australian ballot, before and after the 1890s realignment, before and after the advent of the direct primary, and with wide variation in turnover and the proportion of incumbents seeking reelection. We also sought to minimize the effects of apportionment by not choosing election years ending in "2." Despite the diversity of the elections in our sample, our empirical results are remarkably consistent across the years we have chosen, which makes us reasonably confident that our sample selection is not driving our conclusions.

trade (Stanwood 1903). The election of 1874 was particularly interesting in this regard as the controversy over the Tariff Act of 1873 led to the Republican Party losing 96 seats and majority control of the House for the first time since the Civil War (Baack and Ray 1983; Stanwood 1903; Taussig 1910).

In many ways the 1880s was the era when the roots of the 1896 realignment began to grow. The Populist movement began to emerge as an outgrowth of the Farmers Alliance that responded to the gradual shift away from an agrarian way of life (Crowley and Skocpol 2001). Democrats won a large majority in the House in the 1882 election, but lost 18 seats in the election of 1884 despite winning the presidency back from the Republican Party. Currency issues were as controversial as ever, spurred on by passage of the Tariff Act of 1883, the Panic of 1884, and contractionary lending policies by many large banks (Epstein and O'Halloran 1996; Stanwood 1903). This era firmly established Democrats as the majority party in Congress. While the Republicans had made notable gains in the House in the 1892 elections (they picked up 38 House seats), no one initially anticipated that the electoral tides would change as dramatically as they did for the in-party Democrats two years later. Nevertheless, a series of events began to unfold in 1893 that would eventually spell doom for the Democrats in Congress as the party in power. The Panic of 1893, which was triggered largely by a drop in U.S. gold reserves, resulted in a nationwide depression that would endure for the next few years. Farm prices across the nation dropped, numerous banks and corporations went bankrupt, and levels of unemployment among American workers soared to a high of 18% (Friedman and Schwartz 1971).

With the 1894 elections coming on the heels of one of the worst economic depressions in American history, the Democratic party saw their biggest loss in the U.S. House of Representatives to date—after the election was over, the Democrats had lost 120 seats, giving the Republicans their largest working majority in over 20 years (Martis 1989). From a regional perspective, the Republicans made electoral gains everywhere in the nation except in the South where the Democrats were able to hold on to their traditional stronghold. For the Democrats, this election represented a devastating loss, one that they would have a hard time recovering from during the next few decades. Although the Republicans actually lost 40 seats in the House two years later, the 1896 election is considered as the watershed event that marked the historic realignment that heavily favored the Republican Party well into the twentieth century (Brady 1973, 1985, 1988; Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 1980; but see Mayhew 2000). The 1896 election also signified the beginning of the end for the Populist movement in this country.

The 1904 elections had the least amount of turnover of any in our sample as Theodore Roosevelt won the presidency in a popular and electoral-vote landslide, while the Republicans increased their majority in the House. This lack of turnover can be attributed to the beginning of legislative careerism in the House and an election year in which the two major parties opposed one another on few key issues (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). While the convergence of presidential and

House outcomes in the 1904 elections suggests voters may have linked the two elections, it is important to remember that the growth of congressional campaign committees along with House Speaker Joe Cannon's tour of doubtful districts suggests that by this time period the two campaigns had become fully separated (Kolodny 1998), even if the outcomes had not.

In 1914 the Republicans recovered from the electoral disaster of 1912, gaining 59 House seats in President Wilson's first midterm. While the Democrats managed to gain five seats in the first Senate election held after passage of the 17th Amendment, national politics was trending back towards the Republicans as the strength of the Progressive party began to fade. In many ways the 1914 elections marked the beginning of modern elections as most candidates were chosen in direct primaries rather than party caucuses, and House and Senate elections were formally paired on the ballot for the first time (Busch 1999).

Data and Methods

In order to test the validity of ambition theory in the context of nineteenth and early twentieth century congressional elections, it was necessary to collect a considerable amount of historical election data. Information on incumbent electoral margins was coded from Dubin's (1998) *United States Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*, the most comprehensive source for electoral data over time. From this, we were able to collect relevant information on the names of the incumbents and related challengers, the vote totals on which percentages of the two-party vote were computed, as well as partisan affiliation for each candidate. Additionally, the latter was supplemented with information contained in Martis (1989) to fill in any gaps in party identification.

Since we are particularly interested in examining the likelihood of strategic politician emergence within an historical election context as well as their effects on incumbent electoral performance, it was necessary to collect data on candidates' political backgrounds. While most scholars of congressional elections agree that the quality of the congressional challenger plays an important role in affecting contemporary election outcomes, we know far less about its effect on elections prior to the mid-1940s (for exceptions, see Carson 2001; Carson et al. 2001). This is due largely to the lack of sufficient data on candidates' political backgrounds prior to this time, thus making it diffcult to code challenger quality for elections in the nineteenth or early twentieth century.

Although traditional sources of challenger quality data such as *CQ Weekly Report* and Project Vote Smart are not available for the time period we are studying, we coded as much of this data as we could from historical sources. In particular, our search was facilitated by use of the *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774 to Present*, which allowed us to obtain relevant background information on challengers who defeated congressional incumbents as well as challengers who served prior to or after the election in question. This information was supplemented with data from "The Political Graveyard," a Web site with data

on over 107,000 politicians (http://www.politicalgraveyard.com), the *New York Times Historical Index*, *Google*™, and various state historical societies.[5]

Given that we were unable to find challenger quality data for all challengers, we considered three possible methods of dealing with this problem. First, we considered simply listwise deleting cases for which we could not find challenger quality data. This approach is problematic because we know that the missing cases are not missing completely at random (King et al. 2001). That is, we know that our missing cases never served in Congress, nor were their careers prominent enough to warrant description in any of the sources we employed in our search, and thus we know that they are more likely to have been nonquality than quality. We also considered following the lead of Jacobson (1989) by assuming that candidates for whom we could not find candidate quality information were nonquality. This approach has the advantage of taking into account some of the information we know about the candidates, but since we would be applying this distinction exclusively to losing candidates we feared that this might bias our results towards findings that would support our hypotheses. In the end we elected to impute the missing data using the approach suggested by King et al. (2001).[6] This approach has the advantage of using information we have about these cases (district presidential vote, incumbent previous vote) to predict the missing value, and as King et al. note, ". . . multiple imputation will normally be better than, and almost always not worse than, listwise deletion" (2001, 51).[7] Thus, while the presence of missing data in the variable we are most interested in is not ideal, we think our approach to the problem is the most appropriate way of dealing with the problem.[8]

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[5] As of this writing we have confirmed data on the quality status in 72% of races in 1874, 57% of challengers in 1884, 68% in 1894, 73% in 1896, 44% in 1904, and 71% in 1914. Of these six elections, 1904 stands out in terms of our lack of success in collecting challenger quality data. The 1904 election was unique in other respects as well: a large proportion of incumbents sought and gained reelection, the incumbent president Theodore Roosevelt was very popular, and as noted above in contrast to the late nineteenth century, very few issues divided the major parties. Thus it seems that very few prominent politicians deemed 1904 a good year to run for the House. Further, as Tables 2 and 3 reveal, those quality challengers who did decide to run were no more successful than inexperienced candidates who also sought election in 1904. Thus while our lack of success in finding challenger quality data in 1904 is not ideal, the fact that we report separate equations for each election year prevents this election from driving our overall findings, and our lack of a significant finding for challenger quality in 1904 suggests that our lack of success in collecting data weakens rather than enhances our conclusions about the role of candidate quality in this era.

[6] We used the *Amelia* software provided by Honaker et al. (2001) to impute our missing values. This approach proved to be particularly efficient since most of the variables in our prediction equation, such as previous incumbent vote, district presidential vote, incumbent seniority, and incumbent ideology were fully specified. We used five imputations as King et al. suggest, but our results do not change for larger numbers of imputations. We included incumbent previous vote, district presidential vote (folded), incumbent seniority, and incumbent ideology as independent variables in the prediction equation.

[7] Note that our data do not meet the limited conditions under which listwise deletion is preferable to multiple imputation (King et al. 2001, 58).

[8] We have estimated the reported models using all three approaches: listwise deletion, assuming missing cases are nonquality, and multiple imputation. The substantive results are identical in all three

To get a sense of the underlying partisanship of the district separate from the popularity of the incumbent representative, we also include a control variable for the most closely related proxy for this measure—presidential vote share at the district level. While a variety of scholars have previously used district-level presidential vote as a surrogate for district political preferences, they have not always relied upon the same measure in their analyses of congressional elections. Abramowitz (1991), for instance, employs a measure that deducts the presidential candidate's margin of victory or defeat in the entire nation from his margin in the district. Alternatively, Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001b) and Levitt and Snyder (1995) measure the political preferences of the district using the average share of the two-party presidential vote in the two and three most recent presidential elections, respectively. For our analysis, we follow the convention adopted by Brady, Canes-Wrone, and Cogan (2000), Jacobson (2000), and Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001a), which utilizes the share of the two-party vote in the most recent presidential election as a proxy for district preferences. More specifically, we incorporate the share of the two-party vote received by the incumbent party's presidential candidate in the most recent presidential election.[9]

Since presidential vote share at the congressional district level was not compiled prior to the early 1950s, we had to construct such a measure for the elections of interest in the late 1800s and early 1900s based on existing county-level returns. To generate such a measure, we relied on ICPSR study 8611 (Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 1986), which reports both presidential and congressional vote at the county level. Fortunately, our construction of the district-level measure was simplified by the inclusion of a variable in the data set that mapped each county to its corresponding congressional district(s). For those districts composed entirely of whole counties, it was simply a matter of aggregating the county-level data to the district level. For those districts composed of a combination of whole and partial counties, the procedure used to generate district-level data was more complicated.

For multidistrict counties, we followed the aggregation method adopted by Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart, wherein they included "cases where the percentage of the district's population that was contained in whole counties was at least 50 percent" (2001a, 155) and excluded those that did not meet this criterion.[10] At-large districts were aggregated for the entire state as a whole, and those

totals were used for each of the respective at-large districts if more than one was in existence in a given year.[11]

Other variables included in our analyses include a measure of ideological extremism for incumbent's and congressional districts. For incumbents we computed ideological extremism as the absolute value of the members 1st dimension DW-NOMINATE score (Poole and Rosenthal 1997).[12] For congressional districts we created a "folded over" presidential vote-share variable to produce a measure of competitiveness that we employ in the challenger emergence model (see Table 3).[13] We also include a measure of incumbent seniority measured as the number of congresses served since the legislator was first elected.[14]

Summary Evidence

To assess the extent of strategic emergence in an historical context, we begin by considering general patterns of voter, challenger, and incumbent behavior in each of the elections in our analysis. Recall that we selected six elections with considerable variation in turnover among incumbents to give us the opportunity to speak more generally about differences across elections in this historical era. Indeed, as Table 1 reveals, the proportion of incumbents seeking reelection gradually increases over time; the reelection rate among incumbents varied from a low of 51% in 1894 elections to a high of more than 90% in 1904. While these rates of incumbent turnover may seem high by contemporary standards, we should keep in mind the nature of the era under consideration. Even with the gradual decline in the practice of rotation in office during this period (Kernell 1977; Struble 1979), the incidence of "careerism" in the legislature was only beginning to take hold (Fiorina, Rohde, and Wissel 1975; Polsby 1968). The development and growth of the seniority system was gradually encouraging more legislators to remain in office for longer periods of time, but the volatility of local and national conditions in the late nineteenth century still encouraged a sizeable number of legislators to voluntarily leave office rather than risk electoral defeat.

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as party machines were stronger in these urban areas and thus may have been more effective at recruiting quality candidates. However, much like today, many urban districts were not competitive electorally, and including these districts in models without presidential vote share as a covariate does not alter our findings on the importance of challenger quality.

[11] As Cox and Katz note, "at-large elections were illegal from 1842–1872, allowable under certain conditions from 1872 to 1929, and then again illegal after 1968 (2002, 25)."

[12] DW-NOMINATE scores range from −1, extremely liberal to +1, extremely conservative. Thus by using the absolute value of DW-NOMINATE we are able to directly account for the ideological extremism of both liberal and conservative members.

[13] To construct this measure we "folded over" Democratic presidential vote share so that districts with a 80% Democratic vote share (DVS) would be coded identically to those with a 20% Democratic vote share. Thus: $DVS - 100 = DVS \ if \ DVS \geq 50$.

[14] Seniority data for members of the House was coded by the authors.

TABLE 1

Summary Statistics

Variable	1874	1884	1894	1896	1904	1914
Incumbents Defeated	37%	20%	31%	38%	8%	17.5%
	(146)	(238)	(258)	(272)	(297)	(362)
Incumbents Seeking Reelection	59%	64%	70.6%	72%	75%	81.1%
	(247)	(367)	(378)	(37)	(406)	(435)
Quality Challengers Facing						
Democratic Incumbents	11%	39%	63%	67%	13%	30%
	(35)	(139)	(176)	(80)	(122)	(222)
Republican Incumbents	41%	26%	39%	59%	7%	25%
	(109)	(84)	(82)	(189)	(175)	(85)
Freshmen Incumbents	33%	37%	62%	67%	22%	41.5%
	(84)	(134)	(91)	(132)	(98)	(119)
Non-Freshmen Incumbents	37%	30%	42%	38%	20%	23%
	(62)	(98)	(165)	(140)	(200)	(197)
Incumbent Previous Vote < 55%	39%	50%	67%	71%	39%	39%
	(51)	(96)	(129)	(108)	(83)	(155)
Incumbent Previous Vote ≥ 55%	32%	25%	35%	32%	12%	18%
	(95)	(136)	(130)	(168)	(214)	(162)
Presidential Vote < 55%	42.5%	50%	67%	71%	47%	27%
	(47)	(103)	(37)	(83)	(250)	(108)
Presidential Vote ≥55%	31%	23%	34%	31%	15%	31%
	(99)	(129)	(142)	(193)	(47)	(208)
Freshman Incumbents with	33%	53%	45%	62%	30%	44%
Previous Vote < 55%	(33)	(61)	(85)	(87)	(37)	(91)
Quality Challengers Emerging						
In Open Seats	71%	61%	71%	94%	90%	70%
	(101)	(62)	(93)	(106)	(52)	(73)
Incumbent Races with Split	4.7%	9.6%	8.2%	13.6%	10.9%	14.7%
Outcomes	(7)	(41)	(26)	(46)	(26)	(31)
Open Seat Races with Split	38.2%	11.5%	37%	10%	20%	18.2%
Outcomes	(37)	(42)	(39)	(12)	(10)	(23)

Our data suggest that experienced candidates exhibited differences in their patterns of emergence across each of the elections with respect to the two main parties. During the tumultuous elections of the 1890s, both parties ran a high proportion of quality candidates, whereas in 1874 the Democrats fielded far more quality candidates than did the Republicans on their way to taking control of the House. Candidates having held previous elective office were also more likely to exhibit patterns of strategic behavior with respect to levels of incumbent seniority. In all but 1874, we see that freshmen incumbents face quality challengers with greater frequency than do nonfreshmen.

In considering the patterns for incumbent marginality, we see that marginal incumbents—those who won with less than 55% of the vote—faced a quality

challenger at higher rates than "safe" incumbents for all six elections in our sample. This pattern is particularly stark in the 1904 election when marginal incumbents were three times more likely to face a quality challenger than were safe incumbents. We see a similar pattern for district level partisanship (as measured by the proportion of the vote share received by the presidential candidate of the incumbent's party). In five of the six elections studied (1914 is the exception) we see quality challengers emerging at a higher rate in districts with a competitive presidential election. One could argue that this congruence is due to highly correlated congressional and presidential outcomes, but as Table 1 reveals there are a nontrivial number of districts with split outcomes, especially in open-seat races. While these numbers are not as large as we see in contemporary elections they do demonstrate that voters of this era increasingly considered the two races as distinct, and that the outcomes were not as closely linked as others have speculated (Gaddie and Bullock 2000; Jacobson 1990).[15]

Empirical Results

The preceding section offers some insightful evidence suggesting that experienced challengers acted strategically when deciding whether or not to emerge in the elections we consider. Nevertheless, the evidence marshaled does not yet offer a general explanation regarding the effect of ambitious politicians on incumbents' electoral fortunes. This issue is addressed more systematically through a multiple OLS regression analysis that captures the simultaneous effect of a number of variables on candidate vote margin. The data for this analysis consists of all contested races in the House of Representatives during the six elections in our sample. The dependent variable is the incumbent's share of the two-party vote (Republican and Democrat) in each contested election.

In considering the electoral performance of incumbent members of Congress initially, the results from a set of OLS models across each of the six election years are displayed in Table 2. Most notably, our hypothesis regarding the presence of an experienced challenger is supported for all six elections. In particular, we observe that the coefficient on challenger quality is negative in all six elections and achieves statistical significance in all but the 1904 election. While the electoral effect of this variable varies from one election to the next (the size of the coefficient is as low as 2% in 1884, and as high as 8% in 1874), it is nonetheless a consistent and important predictor of electoral performance among incumbent legislators. Simply stated, incumbents who ran against an experienced challenger in each of these elections received a smaller percentage of the two-party vote share, all else equal.[16]

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[15] For the 1992–98 period the average number of seats in which the district and presidential outcomes diverged was approximately 23% for incumbent races and 26% for open-seat races.

[16] Note that throughout our analysis we use the simple dichotomy of whether or not the challenger held previous elective office as our measure of challenger quality. We chose not to use more nuanced measures because the simple dichotomy performs as well as more sophisticated measures in other

TABLE 2

OLS Model of Incumbent Vote Share in House Elections[1]

Variable	1874	1884	1894	1896	1904	1914
Challenger Quality	−8.13*	−2.23*	−6.72*	−7.58*	−1.00	−7.41*
	(2.55)	(.98)	(1.20)	(1.22)	(1.08)	(1.47)
Previous Vote	−.02	.11*	.54*	.66*	.39*	.64*
	(.13)	(.043)	(.067)	(.072)	(.034)	(.04)
Presidential Vote	8.65	.92*	−.001	.11*	.54*	.09*
	(15.89)	(.062)	(.034)	(.042)	(.04)	(.04)
Seniority	1.37*	−.11	.061	−.089	.44*	.10
	(.43)	(.11)	(.17)	(.21)	(.12)	(.20)
Incumbent Ideology	19.98*	2.76	21.95*	−4.96	−11.29*	26.99*
	(9.56)	(3.19)	(3.94)	(4.02)	(2.69)	(4.62)
Constant	44.91*	−.26	20.33*	18.69*	8.52*	12.65*
	(21.83)	(3.29)	(3.90)	(3.83)	(2.59)	(2.35)
Number of Cases	144	209	230	227	246	253
R^2	.13	.65	.46	.55	.79	.80
Root MSE	13.56	7.01	9.13	7.83	5.76	9.48

[1] The dependent variable is the incumbent's share of the two-party vote. Cell entries are unstandardized coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. * = $p \leq .05$.

This finding is particularly interesting in 1874, a year in which the Democratic Party captured majority control of the House for the first time since the Civil War. Most accounts of this election have blamed the Panic of 1873 and the Republican Party's protectionist tariff for this outcome. Indeed, Stanwood (1903(II), 186) went so far as to call the 1874 election a "political revolution" against the Republican Party. Yet, if we look closer, the revolution appears to be limited to Republicans facing a quality challenger. Over 75% of losing Republican incumbents lost by less than 8% of the vote, which is the magnitude of the challenger quality coefficient for that year. Further, only 15% of Republican incumbents facing a quality challenger won in 1874, compared with 81% for those facing a nonquality challenger. This disparity in outcomes across candidate quality is not consistent with the notion that national tides alone swept Republicans out of office. Instead, we think the 1874 elections reflect Jacobson and Kernell's parallel findings for the 1974 elections—decisions among candidates and elites about who was on the ballot—were the crucial factor linking national conditions to electoral outcomes.

We also observe in Table 2 that an incumbent's previous vote margin is a consistent predictor of how well each legislator does in the subsequent election. In general, the enduring popularity of the incumbent as reflected by the previous electoral returns appears to be a strong reflection of the subsequent two-party vote share, in all but the 1874 election. The fact that this variable is significant

studies of challenger quality, thus the dichotomous measure makes inference more parsimonious without suffering any substantive loss. Further, it would be extremely difficult to construct a scale measure that would compare the quality of previous offices held in this time period.

even when controlling for presidential vote share suggests that incumbents had developed a personal vote during this time period. Additionally, we observe that the variable measuring the proportion of the vote share received by the presidential candidate of the incumbent's party in the most recent presidential election is significant in all but 1874 and 1894, both of which are midterm elections. As expected, the positive sign on this variable suggests that incumbent legislators tend to do better electorally in those districts that are less competitive as measured by previous presidential vote at the district level.

In terms of the remaining variables in each of the models, seniority is only statistically significant in 1874 and 1904 precluding us from offering generalizations about the likely influence of length of service in Congress on incumbent vote share. Although the ideological extremism of the incumbent (measured as the absolute value of the legislator's first-dimension DW-NOMINATE score) is statistically significant in four of the six years we consider, the sign on this variable is positive in 1874, 1894, and 1914, but negative in 1904. This anomalous finding is likely the result of interactions between extreme candidates, district competitiveness, and candidate quality. That is, we would not expect ideological extremism to harm an incumbent if he/she represents a decidedly partisan district. However, incumbents who are out of step with their districts may find their voting record harmful to their reelection chances.[17]

Beyond evaluating electoral performance as measured by the incumbent's two-party vote share in each of the six elections, we also fit a series of logit models estimating the likelihood that an incumbent would win reelection. The results for the models are displayed in Table 3. In particular, we observe that the coefficient on challenger quality is negative in all six models and statistically significant in all but 1904. Said differently, incumbents who ran against an experienced challenger were less likely to win, all else equal. In fact an incumbent facing a quality challenger in 1874 saw his/her probability of defeat rise approximately 26%, all else equal, a pattern that is reminiscent of modern electoral politics. In 1894, 1896, and 1914 this pattern is not as pronounced, with the probability of defeat increasing approximately 20% if a quality challenger enters the race, demonstrating that even in perilous years for incumbents, challenger quality played an important role. In 1884, the data suggest that an incumbent running against a quality challenger faced a 9% increase in the probability of defeat with a quality challenger in the race; this is not as large as in other years, but certainly not trivial either.

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[17] We fit these models with a term interacting ideological extremism and district competitiveness. The results were somewhat mixed, with the interaction generally reducing incumbent vote share, but having no effect on the likelihood of incumbent victory. The inclusion of this variable had no effect on the other variables in the models so we chose to omit the interaction term to keep the presentation parsimonious. Also note that we fit models with regional dummy variables in an attempt to determine if there were significant regional variation in the general patterns we report. The inclusion of regional variables did not alter our substantive results so we opted not to include them in the reported results.

Overall, we think this is an extremely important finding as it suggests that during this historical era, incumbents were much less secure and more prone to electoral defeat by candidates with prior elective experience. This finding is also robust across decades and variation in overall incumbent reelection rates. These data further suggest that candidate quality played an important role in the outcome of elections in this noncandidate-centered era.

Also of note from the results in Table 3 are the sign and significance for the prior vote margin variables. With the exception of 1874 and 1884, the coefficient on the incumbent's previous vote margin is positive and statistically significant. As we would generally expect, incumbents who won the previous election by a larger vote margin were also more likely to win in the most recent election. Interestingly, we only detect a related pattern for the variable measuring presidential vote share at the district level in the 1884 and 1904 elections. This finding suggests that the outcomes of presidential and congressional elections were not as strongly linked in this time period as conventional wisdom has suggested.

Although incumbent ideology is statistically significant in all but 1896, the coefficient on the variable is positive in both 1874, 1884, and 1894, but negative in 1904, which is similar to what we find in the OLS results presented in Table 2. Additionally, the variable measuring seniority is only statistically different from zero in 1914, which suggests that on the whole, members who were new in the chamber were not more or less likely to win reelection than other members of the House.

To further evaluate whether experienced challengers were behaving strategically in the manner consistent with ambition theory, we also estimated a series

TABLE 3

Logit Model of Incumbent Reelection in House Elections[2]

Variable	1874	1884	1894	1896	1904	1914
Challenger Quality	−1.24*	−1.80*	−1.37*	−1.77*	−.63	−1.72*
	(.47)	(.62)	(.44)	(.45)	(.83)	(.47)
Previous Vote	.03	.065	.14*	.13*	.22*	.09*
	(.02)	(.05)	(.04)	(.04)	(.12)	(.02)
Presidential Vote	2.08	.20*	−.006	−.003	.24*	−.01
	(2.68)	(.05)	(.01)	(.01)	(.05)	(.02)
Seniority	.08	−.045	−.06	−.16	.03	.22*
	(.08)	(.05)	(.05)	(.14)	(.16)	(.10)
Incumbent Ideology	3.90*	4.53*	6.59*	1.75	−5.90*	5.11*
	(1.70)	(1.76)	(1.40)	(1.37)	(2.57)	(1.62)
Constant	−3.32*	−13.02*	−8.20*	−5.86*	−19.48*	−5.28*
	(1.57)	(3.14)	(2.44)	(2.08)	(8.07)	(1.34)
Number of Cases	144	209	230	227	247	253
PsuedoR^2	.12	.44	.35	.26	.60	.40
Chi^2(5)	22.83	93.78	72.86	59.10	83.82	122.62

[2] The dependent variable is incumbent reelection coded 1 if the incumbent wins reelection. Cell entries are unstandardized coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. * = $p \leq .05$.

TABLE 4

Logit Model of Challenger Emergence in House Elections[3]

Variable	1874	1884	1894	1896	1904	1914	All Years
Presidential Vote	2.60	−.05	−.004	.028*	.052	.036	.011
	(1.74)	(.03)	(.01)	(.014)	(.035)	(.019)	(.006)
Previous Vote	.03	−.03*	−.056*	−.07*	−.06	−.047*	−.04*
	(.02)	(.015)	(.02)	(.03)	(.04)	(.01)	(.006)
Incumbent Ideology	−2.62	−.55	−2.28*	−1.54	−.70	−1.74	−1.20*
	(1.51)	(1.15)	(.90)	(1.34)	(1.85)	(1.31)	(.47)
Freshman	−.28	−.18	.15	.66	.06	.69*	.31*
	(.36)	(.40)	(.31)	(.38)	(.56)	(.35)	(.14)
Open Seat	.66	1.01*	1.02*	3.57*	4.48*	2.34*	1.56*
	(.37)	(.48)	(.32)	(.61)	(1.10)	(.45)	(.16)
Majority Party × Change in GNP							−6.79*
							(2.95)
1874 Election							.57
							(.39)
1884 Election							.07
							(.29)
1894 Election							−.29
							(.29)
1896 Election							.09
							(.28)
1914 Election							−.88*
							(.34)
Constant	−.98	4.68*	4.18*	3.52	1.34	1.11	2.27*
	(1.81)	(2.21)	(1.43)	(2.13)	(2.92)	(1.10)	(.59)
Number of Cases	178	182	228	234	101	235	1158
PsuedoR^2	.04	.07	.10	.30	.36	.32	.16
Chi^2	9.66	14.49	31.58	93.69	49.96	102.94	245.75

[3] The dependent variable is emergence of a quality candidate, coded 1 if a quality challenger entered the race. Cell entries are unstandardized coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. * = $p \leq .05$.

of logit models where challenger emergence was the dependent variable of interest. Table 4 presents the results from this analysis.[18] Most notably, we observe that experienced challengers were clearly exhibiting strategic behavior in determining whether or not to emerge in the six election years. In particular, the results indicate that strategic politicians were more likely to run in open seat contests (no incumbent was seeking reelection) where their chances of getting elected would be significantly greater. An open seat increased the probability of a quality challenger emerging by 22% in 1894, and over 50% in 1896, 1904, and 1914. While this result would be intuitive in contemporary House elections (Gaddie and Bullock 2000), the fact that we find evidence of "strategic entry" in a non-

[18] Note that the models in Table 4 contain only those cases in which we were able to confirm the quality status of challengers.

candidate-centered era further calls into question the received wisdom that the increasing importance of candidate quality in modern elections is a result of more candidate-centered elections.

The results in Table 4 also suggest that strategic politicians were more likely to emerge in districts that were more competitive (as measured by the incumbent party's previous vote share). In four of the six elections (1874 and 1904 are the exceptions), we see that an increase in previous vote share is associated with a decrease in the probability of quality challenger emergence. In general, there appears to be an inverse relationship between strategic candidate emergence and incumbent vote share—the higher the incumbent's previous vote margin, the less likely an experienced challenger is to run against an incumbent. This finding is also largely consistent with contemporary studies of House elections in terms of general patterns of candidate emergence. For two of the six elections, the variable measuring freshmen status in the House is both positive and significant, indicating that experienced candidates were more likely to run against these incumbents. This seems reasonable from a strategic point of view given that newly elected legislators are typically more vulnerable than more senior members, at least in the contemporary era (Erikson 1971).

The final column in Table 4 reports pooled results for all six election years and allows us to assess the effect of national economic conditions on patterns of challenger emergence. Jacobson (1989) suggests that national economic conditions should be an important determinant of challenger emergence. More specifically, Jacobson argues that we should observe more quality candidates of the "out" party emerging when economic conditions are not favorable to the incumbent party. Lynch (2002) suggests that economic conditions were particularly salient for congressional elections in this time period due to the large role that Congress played in shaping national economic policy and owing to the fact that the media regularly covered the day-to-day activities of Congress (Kernell and Jacobson 1987). Using newly available economic data for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Lynch finds national economic conditions have an important effect on aggregate election outcomes. Using Lynch's data on per capita change in gross national product (GNP), we constructed an interaction term between change in per capita GNP and majority party status in order to determine whether or not there is an association between national economic conditions and challenger emergence.[19] As the results in Table 4 reveal, we find that the minority party in the House is more likely to recruit quality challengers for seats they do not currently hold when national economic conditions are not favorable. Substantively, the model suggests that, holding all else equal, a majority party incumbent, nonfreshman would see his/her probability of facing a quality challenger increase from approximately 40% to approximately 57% as the change in per

[19] Due to the fact that these data are annual and not state specific we were forced to pool the six elections into one model. Also, the substantive results of this model do not change if we substitute data on prices of goods for per capita GNP.

capita GNP moved from it highest to lowest value in our sample. Thus, it does appear that, much like today, national economic conditions had an important effect on the entry decisions of strategic politicians in this era.

Conclusions

Whereas much of the extant literature on congressional politics has focused on elections in the post-World War II era, this paper takes a noticeably different tack by focusing on House races in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In particular, we focus on six House elections from this earlier era—the elections of 1874, 1884, 1894, 1896, 1904, and 1914—to test the robustness of ambition theory (Rohde 1979; Schlesinger 1966) and the extent to which strategic behavior in an historical context is in keeping with the Jacobson-Kernell (1981) and Jacobson (1989) theory of strategic politicians. Much of the conventional wisdom concerning these elections is based on anecdotal evidence or purely descriptive accounts. With few exceptions, journalistic or historical explanations for events in these elections are accepted as fact even when, at times, they do not conform to contemporary theoretical expectations. By testing extant theories of electoral politics in an historical context, we can seek to shed new light on historical puzzles or questions, and in the process, further refine mainstream theories of congressional elections with out-of-sample data.

To be clear, we are not directly challenging the argument posed by Jacobson and Kernell (1981) and Jacobson (1989) with respect to strategic politicians in congressional races. Rather, we demonstrate that their theoretical expectations are equally appropriate in the context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century House races. In particular, we demonstrate that politicians from this era appear to have been influenced by similar parameters such as the likelihood of victory, value of the congressional seat, and the opportunity costs associated with running. While the process of getting on the ballot was different for much of this time period, and hence the mechanism by which national conditions played out was different, the candidates, both real and potential, faced much the same strategic calculus they face today. Even though this is an era of politics characterized by strong partisanship and dominant party leaders, the necessary conditions were still present for the strategic emergence of experienced candidates. In fact, recent work by Kolodny (1998) on the development of congressional campaign committees in the nineteenth century suggests that party elites were in an ideal position to recruit quality candidates and encourage them to emerge when conditions were most favorable to their chances of success. However, our results do cast doubt on Jacobson's (1989, 1990) conjecture that the increasing role of candidate quality in post-World War II elections is due to the rise of candidate-centered campaigns.

Beyond shedding light on an important era in American political development, our results show that contemporary theories of electoral politics provide a useful framework for analyzing earlier elections. Indeed, our findings suggest that many

of the same factors that shape electoral outcomes today were also important in an earlier historical era. In particular, the results clearly indicate that strategic politicians had an effect on elections in a pre-candidate centered era of congressional politics. Not only were experienced politicians more likely to emerge in open-seat races, but they were also more likely to challenge marginal incumbents and run when national conditions were more favorable to their party's chances of success. Additionally, the incidence of high turnover in these elections was often a function of strategic challenger emergence—in many cases, incumbents who faced an experienced challenger were less likely to win, all else equal.

Obviously, this paper represents only the "tip of the iceberg" in terms of additional work seeking to examine contemporary theories of electoral politics across time. We have focused on only one specific aspect of congressional elections in this historical era—the strategic emergence of experienced candidates in House races. Much work remains to be done in terms of examining similar and related questions across a larger subset of House elections, understanding the effects of election timing and redistricting on electoral outcomes in this era, the incumbency advantage in this era, as well as the institutional changes leading to the growth of careerism in Congress.[20] Future work in this mode should further serve to enrich our understanding of electoral outcomes and political behavior from an historical perspective.

Acknowledgment

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[20] See Engstrom (2003) for a discussion of the political strategy associated with redistricting in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

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