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# Congressional Campaigns

## Session 15

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17.263: American Elections

# Roadmap

[Congressional Campaign Strategies](#)

Peer Feedback

# Congressional Campaign Strategies

## Different from Presidential Elections

U.S. House and Senate elections differ in important ways from presidential elections.

- ▶ Straightforward **plurality** rule (no Electoral College)
- ▶ No **term limits** (unconstitutional), so more incumbents
- ▶ Fewer—and less balanced—**resources** (incumbents advantaged)
- ▶ Less—and less balanced—**information** (esp. challengers)

## But Tied to Presidential Elections

Congressional races are strongly shaped by **national forces** beyond the control of individual members.

- ▶ State of the economy
- ▶ Presidential popularity
- ▶ Presidential coattails and midterm loss

So congressional candidates focus on what they can control.

# Strategic Candidacy

One thing candidates can control is **whether and when to run for office**.

- ▶ **Incumbents** generally have an electoral **advantage**.
  - ▶ Selection
  - ▶ Visibility
  - ▶ Personal vote
- ▶ The best (e.g., experienced) candidates tend to wait until they have the best chance of victory (**strategic candidate entry**).
- ▶ This usually means waiting for an **open seat**, which further increases the incumbency advantage (the “**scare-off**” effect).
- ▶ Incumbents also **retire strategically** in anticipation of a tough race.
- ▶ For these reasons, challenger quality and incumbent retirements tend to be **leading indicators** (and contributing causes) of electoral shifts.

## Party, Policy, and “Homestyle”

Candidates also seek to project electorally advantageous images to voters.

- ▶ Positive personal attributes
- ▶ Consensual local issues
- ▶ Policy benefits (“pork”) they have brought to their constituency
- ▶ Distinguishing themselves from their party. . .
- ▶ . . . while not alienating their base.

# Varieties of Congressional Messages

## Self-focused

- ▶ Positive biographical
- ▶ Party-consistent issue position/emphasis
- ▶ Party-inconsistent issue position/emphasis

## Opponent-focused

- ▶ Personal attack ad
- ▶ Policy attack ad



## Scott Brown (R-Massachusetts), 2010



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## Ted Cruz (R-Texas), 2018



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## Abigail Spanberger (D-Virginia), 2018



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## Duncan Hunter (R-California), 2018



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## Jaime Harrison (D-South Carolina), 2020



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<https://twitter.com/jacobrubashkin/status/1317541031504711685?lang=en>



# Peer Feedback

## Breakout Groups

- ▶ You will now break out into preassigned groups.
- ▶ Your group should include both the person whose paper you commented on and the person who commented on yours.
- ▶ Select two people to go today (e.g., the next two birthdays).
- ▶ For each person (“writer”), do the following ( $\approx$  15 min/race):
  - ▶ **Writer** gives brief **overview** of their race.
  - ▶ **Commenter** asks **questions**, makes **connections** to course themes, and offers constructive **suggestions** for improvement.
  - ▶ **Others** join in the **conversation**.

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17.263 American Elections  
Fall 2020

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