

NEW DIRECTIONS IN AMERICAN POLITICS



Second Edition

NEW DIRECTIONS IN CONGRESSIONAL POLITICS

EDITED BY

Jamie L. Carson and Michael S. Lynch



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As the U.S. Congress has steadily evolved since the Founding of our nation, so too has our understanding of the institution. The second edition of *New Directions in Congressional Politics* offers an accessible overview of the current developments in our understanding of America's legislative branch. Jamie L. Carson and Michael S. Lynch help students bridge the gap between roles, rules, and outcomes by focusing on a variety of thematic issues: the importance of electoral considerations, legislators' strategic behavior to accomplish objectives, the unique challenges of Congress as a bicameral institution in a polarized environment, and the often-overlooked policy outputs of the institution.

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Jamie L. Carson is the UGA Athletic Association Professor of Public and International Affairs II in the Department of Political Science at the University of Georgia. His research interests include the U.S. Congress, congressional elections, separation of powers, and American political development. Recent books include *Electoral Incentives in Congress* (with Joel Sievert), *The Politics of Congressional Elections, 10th edition* (with Gary Jacobson), and *Change and Continuity in the 2016 and 2018 Elections* (with John Aldrich, Brad Gomez, and David Rohde).

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Preface

Jamie L. Carson and Michael S. Lynch

For those of us who analyze and study the U.S. Congress, it can be difficult at times to convey our sense of enthusiasm to our students about examining this legislative institution. Much of the day-to-day activity and procedural minutiae that transpires on the floor of the House or Senate might seem like “inside” baseball to the uninitiated. Yet, as the national institution responsible for making our laws, it is important that everyone has a solid understanding of how individual members get elected, the role of committees, leaders, and parties in the lawmaking process, and why legislative outcomes look the way they do. As one of three main branches of government, the U.S. Congress does not function in isolation. Rather, individual members in both chambers attempt to reach legislative compromises with other political actors in order to enact solutions for the issues and problems facing today’s citizens. This is especially true in the extremely polarized era of politics that characterizes the contemporary House and Senate.

In the chapters that follow, a number of leading scholarly experts address many of the traditional subjects associated with the study of the U.S. Congress. We want to especially thank the contributors for writing an original set of essays that deal with a variety of interesting and timely issues associated with congressional politics. Based on our careful read of each of the chapters in this new edition, it is no exaggeration to say that we are thoroughly impressed with the overall quality of the individual contributions. Each of the contributors put in a considerable amount of time and effort pulling together their respective chapters. They also graciously dealt with us asking them to make revisions and nudging them gently when it was necessary. Even though writing and revising these chapters required considerable effort on their part with minimal compensation, all of the authors generously offered to contribute a chapter to the edited volume and for that we are especially grateful.

The first edition of this book would not exist if it were not for the encouragement from Michael Kerns, the former Acquisitions Editor at Routledge Press. In early 2010, he broached the idea of editing a new type of volume on Congress, one that attempted to make cutting-edge scholarly research more accessible to undergraduate and graduate students. The end result was a success and we are happy to now be completing the second edition of this edited volume. We want

to especially thank Jennifer Knerr for encouraging us to work on the new edition and for reaching out to a new group of congressional scholars to contribute outstanding essays to this revised edition. We want to thank University of Georgia doctoral students Alice Kisaalita and Aaron Hitefield for their able assistance in the editing process. We also want to thank editorial assistant Jessica Moran and production editor Richard Kemp who were extremely helpful along the way. Additionally, we want to thank the Swales & Willis Project Manager on behalf of Taylor & Francis, Megan Symons, as well as Emma Lockley, who copyedited the manuscript. Lastly, we want to thank the scholars who anonymously reviewed the text. Their comments were incredibly helpful and made the book project even better in the end. At the end of the day, we hope you find the book useful in the classroom.

*Athens, Georgia
October 2019*

Introduction to the Second Edition

Jamie L. Carson and Michael S. Lynch

Congress continues to be a dynamic institution. Since the country's founding, the U.S. Congress has steadily evolved in response to the changing political landscape. Although certain similarities exist to the early Congresses, much has changed across the two legislative chambers over the past 230 plus years. In addition to procedural changes, closely contested and competitive elections regularly bring new members to both the House and Senate. Consider the recent 2018 election, which resulted in the largest number of women elected to the House of Representatives in history, primarily in response to the election of President Trump two years earlier and his subsequent actions in the White House. After eight years of Republican control, the Democrats regained majority status in the House of Representatives and have attempted to find common ground with a Republican president and Senate. The 116th Congress is also one of the most polarized in history, harking back to levels of partisan polarization that have not been seen in this country since before the Civil War. Even with the return of divided government, when one factors in the current budget deficits, debates over entitlements and taxes, and the lingering feelings of distrust and resentment stemming from the 2016 election, it is clear that Congress will continue to play a central role in politics in the years to come.

Studies of congressional politics are often at the forefront of research on American politics and political institutions. Given the complexities associated with numerous aspects of congressional politics, we often rely on cutting-edge research to make sense of political changes and new developments in the House and Senate. Unfortunately, much of the most important research on congressional politics is published in academic journals, whose target audience is either professors or advanced graduate students. This research tends to address fairly narrow questions one at a time or in the context of a specialized debate, often without the necessary background to allow those not working within the sub-field to fully understand. Moreover, an increasing proportion of this research requires advanced statistical knowledge to evaluate these findings. As a result, many aspects of the study of congressional politics can seem confusing and incoherent to undergraduates. To better engage students in the classroom, we need a different type of textbook that can overcome these specific limitations.

Like the first edition, this revised edition of *New Directions in Congressional Politics* offers an accessible and coherent overview of the current state of research on the U.S. Congress. This book brings together leading scholars of congressional politics in one edited volume that deals with myriad important topics. Along the way, a number of important themes in the study of Congress are considered throughout the text: 1) Although representatives have multiple goals in office, their behavior is often motivated by electoral considerations; 2) Legislators often behave strategically in order to accomplish their individual or collective objectives; 3) Congress is a bicameral institution, which often provides a unique set of challenges in the legislative process given the need to reconcile differences in legislation across the two chambers; and 4) An examination of policy outputs and the legislative process is often overlooked in the scholarly research on the institution, but is vitally important.

In terms of specific topics covered in the edited volume, Chapter 1 begins by considering the means by which members first arrive in Congress – congressional elections. The author of this chapter, Erik J. Engstrom, argues that recent scholarship has started to reemphasize the highly partisan nature of congressional elections. Although party machines are no longer dominant like they were during the nineteenth century, new partisan actors – party committees, news outlets, and financial donors – have filled the void once held by party bosses. As a result, congressional elections have become highly nationalized and are much less candidate-centered than they once were. Engstrom expertly documents these trends in recent research and talks about their effects on candidate competition, the incumbency advantage, and differences between House and Senate races. He concludes his discussion by emphasizing possible future directions in the study of congressional elections, including the unprecedented role of money in shaping outcomes.

The second chapter also examines the electoral foundations of Congress by evaluating the role of political parties in recruiting candidates for office. As Austin Bussing, Maura McDonald, and Sarah A. Treul note, parties have taken on a more active role in recruiting candidates in recent years, reflective of the trends noted by Engstrom in the first chapter. More specifically, these authors evaluate the types of candidates recruited by the parties and whether or not these candidates tend to be more loyal to the parties once elected. Based on their analysis of recent elections, they find that modern parties have become very effective at recruiting candidates likely to win and they do all they can to help them get elected initially. Once elected to Congress, however, parties appear to offer few institutional incentives to reward legislators who are electorally successful.

The third and fourth chapters highlight recent trends in Congress, beginning with redistricting and its effect on the legislative institution. As Ryan D. Williamson notes at the outset of Chapter 3, redistricting is an issue that continues to influence the House of Representatives. A number of recent Supreme Court cases, for instance, have continued to keep the subject of redistricting in the news although very little resolution has been made

regarding the impact of redistricting on electoral outcomes. The Court continues to argue that any attempts to reform the practice must be handled at the state level. Somewhat curiously, many continue to believe that redistricting is a contributing factor to increased polarization in Congress, but Williamson demonstrates that this cannot be the case since the Senate is now as equally polarized. Williamson concludes the discussion by focusing on issues that will be front and center during the next redistricting cycle following the upcoming census.

In Chapter 4, Sarina Rhinehart and Michael H. Crespin analyze the topic of women in Congress following the notable gains that women made during the 2018 midterm elections. They begin by examining the prior literature on why women are often less likely to run for elective office as well as the role that both recruitment and fundraising play in this process. They also discuss the various hurdles that women face from both voters and the media along the way. In the second part of their chapter, Rhinehart and Crespin consider factors that predict electoral success in congressional primary elections. Focusing on 2018 in particular, they find that Democratic women did much better than Republicans in the midterm election. They conclude their chapter by focusing on several new directions to consider in research on the role of women in House and Senate elections.

The fifth chapter evaluates the increasing nationalization of congressional elections during the past few decades and examines its effects on representation in Congress. In this chapter, Jamie L. Carson, Jason M. Roberts, and Rachel Porter consider the rising correlation between presidential and congressional voting, which have reached historic levels not seen since the use of the party strip ballot during the nineteenth century. Although there is considerable disagreement in the existing literature regarding the sources of this nationalization, the authors of this chapter utilize both electoral and survey-based data to suggest that elite behavior is the primary explanation for this change. In addition to acknowledging the steady increase in nationalization over recent decades, the authors note that legislators are working harder to win elections and maintain control of their respective institutions, but that they no longer have the personal vote connections that they once had in less nationalized eras.

The next few chapters focus on key institutional features of the modern Congress. In Chapter 6, Danielle M. Thomsen reviews the scholarly literature outlining the origins and existence of partisan polarization in the U.S. Congress. In this context, she focuses on both elite- and mass-level factors that have contributed to polarization in Congress since the early 1970s. The next part of the chapter examines the political consequences of polarization with respect to both legislative outcomes and the policymaking process more generally. She then outlines some potential reform efforts that might help to mitigate polarization under certain consequences. Like the earlier chapters, Thomsen concludes with a discussion of topics in need of further research, providing concrete approaches for conducting research on political parties and polarization.

The goal of Chapter 7, according to James M. Curry, is to evaluate the role of committee influence and power in the current environment. Committees have long been considered the lynchpin of congressional activity. They embody the expertise that allows Congress, alone among major world parliaments, to legislate independently of the executive branch. Nevertheless, many of the traditional committee-led processes of the past have been replaced by unorthodox practices with centralized control in the party leadership. This chapter explores these developments, examining ways recent congressional changes have altered our understanding of the role of committees in decision-making processes. Although Curry concludes that “committee government” no longer characterizes the era in which we live, committees remain important and influential institutions, structuring the legislation that is crafted and playing a role in congressional action. The chapter concludes with suggestions about where scholars should look next in terms of understanding recent developments in committee politics.

In Chapter 8, Michael S. Lynch, Anthony J. Madonna, and Allison S. Vick examine the key role that the Rules Committee plays in the House of Representatives. The “special rules” this committee issues allow the majority party to control the agenda of the House and influence the ideological content of the policy the House generates. They explore the history of special rules and document how the majority party have increased the use of restrictive rules that prevent members of the House from openly amending bills that are considered on the House floor. Finally, they present data on structured rules, rules that allow the majority party to pick and choose which amendments to bills can be considered. Overall, the authors conclude that the majority party has increased its ability to control issues in the House through the increased use of restrictive special rules.

To give equal time to policies and procedures in the U.S. Senate, Greg Koger highlights this institution in Chapter 9. Although the Senate has many distinguishing institutional features, the unusual electoral structure, the supermajority rules, and ability of a minority to defeat legislation by filibustering are unquestionably the most well-known. Koger offers an overview of the major institutional features of the Senate in this chapter, highlighting how this chamber has developed quite differently from the U.S. House over time. He then proceeds to examine the increasing partisanship of the U.S. Senate, especially with respect to the politics of executive and judicial nominations. He reviews several aspects of the Senate rules including recent efforts to limit the use of the filibuster. Koger concludes by identifying several potential avenues of research with respect to the Senate and its role in the legislative process.

In Chapter 10, Laurel Harbridge-Yong examines whether Congress is currently capable of creating meaningful legislation both in terms of the risks of gridlock and whether the legislation that does pass is substantially more partisan than in previous eras. Although the media and pundits regularly report that Congress has become an overtly partisan institution mired in gridlock, Harbridge-Yong shows that this is only partially true. In short, bipartisanship

is not dead; it is just hidden from the public eye. Since most attention to the legislative process is given to roll call voting (which truly is partisan), congressional behavior tends to look much more conflictual and partisan to the casual observer. In lieu of focusing exclusively on roll call votes, Harbridge-Yong evaluates measures of bipartisan agreement in Congress by considering cosponsoring coalitions and use these data to shed light on how the majority party in the House uses its agenda-setting powers to manufacture higher or lower levels of partisan polarization. As she explains, the complex picture of policymaking that emerges reveals a latent but remarkably consistent level of bipartisanship agreement in the House during the past few decades. She offers several potential directions for future research in the concluding pages of her chapter.

The remaining chapters in the edited volume focus more directly on the policymaking process in Congress. In Chapter 11, Joshua M. Ryan focuses on the unique relationship between Congress and the executive in the era of Donald J. Trump. By design, the U.S. Constitution invites competition for power between Congress and the president but these factors seem to be magnified during the Trump era. Paralyzed by their own gridlock and polarization, Congress seems unable to respond, with the president's co-partisans' willingness to cede greater amounts of authority to the executive via unilateral powers, like executive orders. Ryan shows that while this view has become widespread in recent years, it is not entirely true. Even since the early days of the Trump administration, Congress has worked behind the scenes to limit presidential power, according to Ryan, and he discusses three possible ways for Congress to push back against the executive in the modern, polarized era. Each offers lots of potential for new research on understanding the changing role between Congress and the executive.

Chapter 12 reviews scholarship on the relationship between the courts and Congress, specifically with regard to judicial selection. In particular, Bethany Blackstone considers much of the recent work on this subject and discusses how rule changes have impacted the courts with respect to processes and outcomes. She examines how advances in measurement have led judicial scholars to explore the relationship between constituency opinion and senators' confirmation votes. After briefly reviewing how the judicial selection process works, Blackstone summarizes much of the current scholarship examining presidents' choices of judicial nominees and Senate consideration of nominees to both the Supreme Court and the lower federal courts. She concludes her chapter by considering various ways in which presidents have tried to reshape the lower federal courts.

In Chapter 13, Justin C. Peck and Jeffery A. Jenkins discuss the subject of congressional reassertion, a topic that challenges the notion of legislative delegation to the president. More specifically, Peck and Jenkins examine those periods across congressional history where Congress actively works to reassert its authority over the executive branch. In the process, they utilize Stephen Stathis' summary of "landmark legislation" from 1789 to 2012 and identify every major law that was enacted in an attempt to reign in executive branch power. Using this "reassertion index" Peck and Jenkins identify three main strategies by which

Congress contests executive branch power, and they substantiate this categorization with a series of qualitative case studies before turning to a more rigorous empirical analysis. They conclude their chapter by highlighting the overlooked nature of congressional reassertion, which offers a new avenue of research for evaluating the lawmaking process in a system of shared and separate powers.

Joel Sievert discusses historical lessons that one can learn from the study of Congress over time in Chapter 14. During the past two decades in particular, Sievert notes that many new insights about Congress have been made by testing modern theories of Congress historically and looking to the past to re-evaluate much of the conventional wisdom about the modern Congress using newly available historical data. One of the most important discoveries that has been made in this vein is that many aspects of the historical congress are not that dissimilar to the modern era as was once thought. Sievert highlights much of the recent work on congressional elections and the electoral connection to demonstrate that members of Congress have always been motivated by electoral considerations, although to varying degrees, as a result of electoral and institutional rules in place during specific eras. He concludes his chapter with several new directions for research on historical congresses using much of this newly collected data.

In the final chapter, Patrick Rickert and Steven S. Smith consider a variety of congressional reforms that might be useful for reducing many of the problems endemic to the U.S. Congress. As the authors correctly note, dissatisfaction with Congress is widespread among its members and the American public, but there is surprisingly little consensus on the causes of the institution's problems or on what can be done about it. Rickert and Smith point out this is not new and has generally been the case for the past several decades. In seeking to better understand the nature of the issues Congress faces, they briefly consider 32 proposals for congressional reform that were first introduced in 1966 by several congressional scholars seeking to better understand legislative dysfunction. Rickert and Smith also seek answers to two specific questions: why do advocates of congressional reform offer the proposals they do and what leads to their success or failure? This chapter seeks to enrich the discussion about legislative reform efforts even though there are no simple answers to this important and ongoing topic.

Part I

Politics and Elections



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Congressional Elections

Electoral Structure and Political Representation

Erik J. Engstrom

Congressional elections are inherently important. They determine who holds power in Congress, and as a consequence determine who holds power in the entire government. For this reason alone they would be worth studying. But congressional elections also present a godsend for researchers interested in the study of campaigns and elections. By providing 435 House races every two years with varying political and economic conditions – constituencies, partisan bases, media markets, demographics, economic interests, etc. – congressional elections provide researchers with a rich variation to study voters, candidates, and campaigns. The presidency, by contrast, offers only one electoral contest every four years, and a unique one at that. Thus, it is unsurprising that congressional elections have attracted substantial scholarly attention during the past few decades. And, as a result, students of congressional elections have produced a rich, and well-respected, body of knowledge. The purpose of this essay is to survey recent developments in the study of congressional elections and to suggest potential new frontiers of exploration.

Parties and Candidates in Congressional Elections

One simple, yet powerful, way to classify the world's legislatures is to place them along a spectrum. At one end are strong-party systems. At the other end are candidate-centered systems. In a strong-party system, voters select candidates based on their party label and the individual attributes of candidates tend to matter less. A parliamentary system, like Great Britain, serves as one clear example (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Cox 1987). Voters cast votes largely based on their opinions towards the Labour or Conservative party, and less on the personal characteristics of the particular candidates running in their constituency. At the other end are candidate-centered systems. In these systems voters care more about the personal characteristics and the issue positions of individual candidates. Here we might place United States congressional elections in the latter half of the twentieth century. This is not to say that party labels are unimportant in candidate-centered elections, or that the personal characteristics of candidates are unimportant in party-centered elections, but that the relative emphasis placed on candidates and party labels differ across the two regime types.

In the context of congressional elections, scholars have found that the importance attached to partisanship, relative to individual candidate attributes, has varied over time. For much of the twentieth century, most scholars would have characterized congressional elections as decidedly candidate-centered. The advantages of incumbency and candidate qualities reached their apex in the latter decades of the twentieth century. More recently, however, it appears that congressional elections have entered a new phase. This is a phase marked by a high degree of partisan and nationalized voting among the electorate. At the same time, the apparent advantages of individual candidate qualities appear to have taken a backseat to partisanship. These trends have produced an emerging body of scholarship examining the causes and consequences of nationalized voting in congressional elections.

Party-Centered versus Candidate-Centered Elections

This section examines the major institutional changes that led, in large part, to the candidate-centered congressional elections of the twentieth century. The first step in winning a congressional seat is to gain the nomination of one of the major political parties. Nowadays, we take it for granted that voters get to choose their party's nominee in primary elections. But choosing nominees in direct primaries was not the norm throughout the nineteenth century. Instead, congressional nominees were typically chosen in closed party nominating conventions. These conventions were comprised of local party elites who met every two years to select congressional nominees (along with other local offices and delegates to state and national conventions). These conventions were often run by party bosses, particularly in cities, who held considerable influence over the nomination process (e.g., Reynolds 2006; Yearley 1970).

The image of candidates being selected in smoke-filled backrooms may be exaggerated, but it contains more than a kernel of truth. Nominations were very much an insiders' game. Party, or factional, loyalty was critical. Running as a maverick, who bucked the local party organization, was a risky way to build a political career. Rather the system rewarded loyalty. The nomination system meant that candidates were dependent on local party managers, or party bosses, for their nomination. Even if an incumbent wanted to continue serving in Congress there was no guarantee that he would be re-nominated. Abraham Lincoln, for instance, was one of the casualties of the practice known as "rotation" – where different factions of a party would take turns holding a congressional seat. Elected to the House of Representatives in 1846 as member of the Whig Party, Lincoln served a single term in the U.S. House of Representatives. Although he expressed interest in running for re-election, the Whig organization in his district chose someone else to be the Whig nominee.

Reforms at the state-level during the early twentieth century replaced the convention nomination system with direct primaries. Still used to this day in almost every state, direct primaries handed the choice of nominees directly to voters.

By forcing candidates to make appeals to voters for nomination, the direct primary accelerated the tilt towards a candidate-centered system (Ware 2002). Candidates have to win votes directly from citizens. Primaries have gradually tilted the competitive advantage to politicians who could develop a personal reputation with voters and away from those whose skills lay in navigating the back-room politics of party conventions (Adams and Merrill 2008; Reynolds 2006). A candidate who wants to buck the party organization can still be re-nominated, as long as they win votes in a primary.

Although primaries reduced the influence of party machines, another, perhaps unintended, consequence was to reduce competition for party nominations. Since the initial adoption of direct primaries there was a steady historical decline in competition within primaries. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, incumbents faced few serious challengers in primaries and often run uncontested. In a comprehensive study of competition in twentieth century primaries, Ansolabehere, Hansen, Hirano, and Snyder (2006, 78) found that the number of competitive House primaries – where the winner receives 60% or less of the vote – was 29% between 1910 and 1938. From 1960 to 2000, the number of competitive primaries plummeted to 11%.

A second major feature of the electoral system concerns the physical conduct of casting a ballot. Although we may think of the mechanics of casting ballots as a rather mundane aspect of elections, it turns out that the order in which candidate names are arranged on a ballot and how ballots are physically cast can have a huge influence on electoral outcomes. One need only look to the 2000 presidential election to see the potential impact of ballot layouts (e.g., Wand, Shotts, Sekhon, Mebane, Herron, and Brady 2001). Today when we vote, we go to a polling station where we receive a ballot containing candidates for every office. These ballots have been compiled and printed out by the state or local government. We then fill out our ballot in secret. Voters are free, if they so choose, to vote for the Democratic nominee for president and a Republican for the House (or vice versa). The ballot is then given to a non-partisan poll worker (or as is becoming more common, mailed in or recorded on a computer).

Contrast that with voting in the nineteenth century. For most of the nineteenth century, elections were conducted using what is known as the “party strip” ballot. This type of ballot had two distinguishing features. First, the ballot featured the party’s nominee for the most important office at the top of the ticket – such as president or governor – and candidates for subordinate offices listed below it. It did not list candidates for other parties. So, for example, the Democratic ballot would contain only Democratic candidates from president to governor to House candidate and so on. Second, ballots were printed and handed out by the parties (today they are printed by the government). Voters would receive these ballots either in their newspapers or they would get them from party “hawkers” standing outside the polling stations. This turned many polling stations into rough-and-tumble arenas as competing party hawkers tried to force their ballots on prospective voters (Bensel 2004; Summers 2004).

During presidential election years the party's nominees for president and vice-president, and frequently their images, headed the ticket, usually followed by the names of the electors, and then candidates to lower offices in descending order. Thus, candidates for Congress would find their names listed below candidates for more prominent offices (i.e., president, governor). Because the ballot only contained candidates of a single-party, voters were faced with a simple choice: vote for all of the Democratic candidates or all of the Republican candidates. The physical format radically curbed split-ticket voting; voting for a Republican nominee for president and a Democrat for Congress was not easy. Although there were some workarounds – such as writing in an alternate name over the name of a listed candidate – these practices were cumbersome. Moreover, voting was public. Voters cast their tickets in full view of anyone who wanted to watch. All of these features reinforced straight-ticket voting (Engstrom and Kernell 2014; Rusk 1970).

Thus, the fates of same-party candidates were therefore thoroughly intertwined. Congressional candidates were dependent on the efforts of local parties to work together to pull them into office (Carson, Engstrom, and Roberts 2007). Congressional candidates were also subject to the popularity of the candidate that headed the ticket. A congressional candidate saddled with an unpopular presidential nominee at the top of the ticket could find the campaign rough-going.

This system fundamentally changed, starting in the late 1880s when Massachusetts first adopted what was known as the Australian, or secret, ballot.¹ The reform efforts were pushed by good-government reformers, sometimes in conjunction with politicians, who were fed up with the perceived (and real) corruption of party machines (Reynolds 2006; Ware 2000). The reform quickly spread across the country and by 1920 almost every state had adopted some version of the new ballot format. The new ballot had a number of distinctive features. First, it was printed by the government rather than by the parties. Second, it placed candidates of *all* the parties onto a single consolidated ballot. Finally, it included provisions for secrecy at the ballot box.

These changes to the electoral system wrought by the Progressive Era helped sweep away the strong party machines and set down the building blocks for the emergence of a candidate-centered system. Candidates began to control their own fates to a much greater degree than they did in the past. They were no longer bound to the fates of the other candidates on the ticket – in particular the presidential nominee at the head of the ticket. They also could no longer rely on the local party organization to pull them to victory by rallying the faithful on Election Day.

Perhaps most important, from the perspective of congressional elections, the individual attributes and campaign talents of candidates began to take on central importance. For instance, split-ticket voting increased following these Progressive Era reforms (Engstrom and Kernell 2014). Similarly, the importance of candidates having prior office-holding experience, in terms of electoral success, increased following the introduction of the Australian ballot (Carson and Roberts 2013). Candidate quality further spiked-up during the 1960s (Cox and Katz 1996). This is not to imply that partisanship does not matter in terms of

voting decisions. It still operates as an informational cue for voters and increasingly so (discussed more below). But it is not the same thing as strong party machines bringing voters to the polls.

In short, changes in the electoral structure turned congressional elections increasingly into a candidate-centered system. Getting to Capitol Hill took entrepreneurial self-starters. Yet, the system just described has recently undergone a number of changes. The rest of this chapter examines how the candidate-centered system has been replaced, in part, by party-focused and nationalized elections.

Competition in Congressional Elections

The most powerful tool that voters have, in the aggregate, to influence Congress is changes in the number of seats each party holds. One need only look to recent elections to see the dramatic influence congressional elections can have. In 2010, Republicans picked up 63 seats in House elections. This seat swing brought the Republicans into control of the House, effectively stalling the more ambitious aspects of the Obama administration's legislative agenda. The 2018 election marked the Democrats return to the majority in the U.S. House. Democrats captured control of the House by riding a wave of public discontent with the first two years of the Trump administration. The Democrats picked up 41 seats, their largest gain since the 1974 election which was held in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal (Jacobson and Carson 2020).

Though dramatic, the seat swings in recent elections pale in comparison to some of those found in earlier periods of American history. For example, in 1854 the Democrats lost a monumental 74 seats. The House only had 234 members in total, so the seat swing accounted for nearly 30% of the membership. Similar swings routinely happened throughout the nineteenth century. In 1874 the Republicans were on the losing end of another massive wipe out – surrendering 94 seats. In 1894, the Democrats lost 125 seats (in a chamber of 357). What is fascinating, and telling, about these elections is that the national vote division did not change all that much (Brady 1991; Engstrom and Kernell 2014). Small vote swings produced outsized seat swings.

Thus, one can think about competition in two ways. The first is competition at the district-level. The second is competition aggregated at the national level. For many years it seemed that the two went together. Where district-level competition was high so was competition for control of Congress. Yet, as recent history is now telling us, these two aspects of competition do not necessarily need to move together. Recent congressional elections display a historically rare pattern – relatively low-level district competition, yet intense competition for national control. Thus, congressional elections have become intensely focused around the small number of districts (and states) in play.

Competition matters because the seat distribution in Congress shapes the ideological alignment of government. The responsiveness of seat swings to vote