CHAPTER 7

Two Institutions, One Choice?

Electoral scholars have a curious tunnel vision—we fixate in large part on one institution at a time. This is the easier path to take, but it limits our theoretical vision and the generalizability of our findings. A prime example is the gallons of ink spilled after every U.S. presidential contest. The presidential election, while undoubtedly the most consequential for the country as a whole, is just one of thousands of contests decided on election day. Furthermore, in innumerable ways the presidential election is an outlier: the political setting is continental in scope, candidates are universally recognized, media coverage is intense, and voter information and interest are high. As a way to learn about the American *presidential* voter, focusing on presidential elections is appropriate. As a way to learn about the American voter in the abstract, it is fraught with danger. Without knowing the ways in which presidential context differs from other electoral contexts, we cannot generalize to elections for other institutions.

Nor is it enough to look intensively at another institutional setting. Political scientists have expanded their field of vision (particularly in the last two decades) to include House, Senate, and to a lesser degree gubernatorial and state legislative elections. These studies provide hints about differences among offices. However, by remaining locked within one institutional context, the result is not much different from focusing on the presidency: specialized knowledge about a single institution but only speculative knowledge about institutional differences. We cannot really learn how institutions affect elections unless we consider settings, institutions, campaigns, and voters *simultaneously.*

In one respect, this is no more than a methodological rule: in order to estimate the effects of a variable, such as institution, it must *vary.* There are deep theoretical and substantive consequences to this decision, however. The choice of methodology—and of variables—limits the theoretical claims that can be tested. In order to evaluate the impact of certain contextual features on candidates and voters, I may need to add additional contexts. Otherwise, I cannot really estimate the explanatory power of contextual variables (of which

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institutional arrangements are just one type). Methodological choices can also limit the generalizability of the results. The way that candidates and voters behave may be unique to one electoral arena, or it may reveal more general rules about political behavior. To discover the latter, we are obligated to replicate our models in other arenas. My theory of legislative elections has often been couched in methodological terms, but my conclusions have substantive import. I have explicitly contrasted institutional with other explanations of House and Senate elections. The findings modify in important ways the conventional wisdom about settings, campaigns, and voting for the U.S. Congress.

To conclude, I will review the ideas and theories that underlie the three-stage model laid out in chapter 2. The two most important claims I made there were, first, that there are three main sets of variables that affect elections—political settings, candidates and campaigns, and voters—and, second, that there are specific causal relationships among these variables. Next, I will summarize the empirical results, highlighting the ways in which my results support or challenge the conventional wisdom about House and Senate elections. Third, I speculate about how this study might be improved, suggesting ways that the House/Senate comparison might be sharpened and proposing other contexts in which this approach may be valuable. Finally, I ask whether these results indicate that the U.S. House and Senate are converging or diverging and what the consequences are for the future of the American electoral system.

Comparing Elections across Institutions

Comparing elections across institutions is hard and complicated. But these difficulties yield significant returns. They help identify the impact of diverse institutional arrangements. They demarcate the limits of an institutional account of elections. *Institution* comprises many meanings, and there are certainly many ways in which institutions can modulate electoral outcomes. Institutions have different constitutional prerogatives, and it is quite possible that these percolate throughout the electoral process. The rules of the game change: the number of seats per district, the length of the term, and the seat allocation formula. The interest and attention paid by other political actors—parties, interest groups, and the mass media—wax and wane according to the importance they attach to various offices. Constituencies vary as well, since the boundaries of electoral districts are seldom contiguous over multiple institutions. Finally, voters are more or less interested in outcomes, apply different evaluative or prototypical standards, and are exposed to higher and lower levels of campaign information.

Any one of these could alter electoral outcomes, and any one might be lumped into the category "institutional effect." The aim here is not to make these differences go away but to model them in such a way that I identify and

understand the contents of each category. The hope is that this exercise will lead us toward perhaps a more restricted, but also more complete, understanding of the effects of House and Senate institutional arrangements on electoral outcomes.

Comparing across institutions is complicated, but it forces us to think carefully about how elective institutions are structured and how they influence the behavior of candidates and voters. I identified three general areas to think about in chapter 2. First, I considered variations in the context or background of elections: the makeup of the district, lines of communication, and long-standing political patterns. Second, I identified variations in the pool of candidates who choose to run for an office and what kinds of campaigns are conducted. Third, I attended to voters: do they evaluate the institutions in different ways and do they employ a particular set of considerations for each institution? Finally, I allowed for institutional differences unaccounted for by these three sets of variables. These differences manifest themselves both as different levels of dependent variables and as differences in interactions among the independent variables.

Institutional comparisons cannot be made when contextual differences are too great. This is the cause of unending debate in comparative politics: to what degree can disparate systems be compared on a common metric, and to what degree are such comparisons so general as to be meaningless?[1] Thus, much can be gained in the comparative approach by using simple, descriptive analyses. Most of my conclusions in chapters 3 and 4 were a product of simply arrays of House and Senate districts, candidates, and campaigns on common dimensions. This descriptive exercise was designed to answer two core questions. First, are there *observable* differences across institutions? This helps us to identify possible variables that might *explain* institutional differences. If, for example, states are no more racially diverse than congressional districts, then it is unlikely that racial diversity can explain any observed differences in Senate and House elections. Once I establish baseline differences, the second question is: to what degree is there *similarity* and *overlap?* Essentially, I presented the joint distribution of these measures in the U.S. House and Senate. This comparison tells me whether a particular variable can be *disentangled* from institution by taking advantage of cases from one institution that in some respects look like cases from the other institution. If all states are heterogeneous and all congressional districts are homogeneous, to take on one aspect of conventional wisdom, then heterogeneity cannot be disentangled from institution. In statistical terms, the variables are completely collinear. We need to answer this question at the outset.

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1. For insight into this debate, see the discussion between comparative politics scholars and area specialists in a special issue of *Africa Today* (44) [April-June 1997].

The second step in my analysis, presented in chapters 5 and 6, tests the relative power of institutional arrangements versus the other variables in the second and third stages of the model. The causal models that include both sets of explanatory variables—institutional variables as well as other independent influences (depending on the particular stage of the analysis)—allow me to parcel out the independent contribution of each. Ideally, of course, I would have had empirical representations of institutional arrangements. This raises a contentious issue: what counts as an *institution?* I cannot resolve this argument here, though I addressed this point briefly in the second chapter. Still, even if there is disagreement on the labels attached to the three sets of variables, I still have fleshed out the contents of institution rather than employing it as a convenient shorthand for a series of unspecified effects. I do not suggest that institutional differences between the U.S. House and Senate are unimportant to voters. Instead, I want to compare the power of institutional variables after I have controlled for other correlated variables.[2] The result allows me to make some inferences about the strength of institutional effects relative to other influences on candidates and voters.

The last stage in the analysis is interpretive: relating the differences and similarities to my theoretical expectations about elective institutions. After controlling for other ways in which electoral districts vary, are institutional differences attenuated? If they are, this tells us that the makeup of the district has more to do with electoral outcomes than do institutional arrangements. Much of this work was done in chapter 6. Do voter expectations about the candidates map into our theoretical understanding about the roles these institutions play in the political system? This tells us whether the public views these elective institutions in different ways (at least when voting) and whether our expectations are supported by the empirical evidence. It may mean that we will have to change the way political scientists think about these institutions. As Fenno showed long ago (1978), the view from the district is quite distinct from the view in the Capitol.

Furthermore, our examination of *changes* in the House and Senate must take into account how voters view these institutions. I indicated one such example in chapter 6. Survey respondents apparently have different expectations of the presidency and Congress (Jacobson 1990b). This has been used as an

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2. The baseline for comparison is the explanatory power of institution without these other variables in the model. A way to estimate this baseline is to first include only institutional variables in the model, then add other sets of variables, and finally examine how the explanatory power of the institutional variables changes. In experimental terms, if I can randomly assign district diversity, candidate quality, and campaign spending levels to states and congressional districts and just vary the "treatment"—institution—I can accurately gauge the magnitude and direction of institutional differences. In the language of causal modeling, I want to control for all spurious and confounding causes of institutional differences.

explanation of the prevalence of divided government. My results show that no such distinction is made between House and Senate, at least when respondents answer survey questions or report on vote choice. The prediction, therefore, should be that the two chambers will be affected in similar ways by electoral forces.

Finally, if the structural relationships among variables is similar while the levels of variables differ, what I referred to as inputs and outputs, we can say that the underlying dynamics of elections are alike across the institutions. It is just that the starting and ending points are not. The result should be a more embellished, more careful description of what institutional differences are in the electoral arena, in what ways candidates and campaigns vary across institutional settings, and how voters change their behavior (if at all) in response to changes in contextual, campaign, and institutional environments.

Comparing the U.S. House and Senate

I selected the U.S. House and Senate as the cases with which to test this approach. They are particularly good institutions for this. There are already many theories of House and Senate elections that implicate institutional differences, but these differences, where possible, should be reexpressed in the language of variables. Thus, modeling and unpacking institution becomes a much easier task. The Senate and House are similar enough that I can array settings, candidate spending, candidate quality, and voter information and evaluations on a single scale. Last, but not least, data on congressional districts, states, House and Senate candidates, and House and Senate voters are readily available.

How do the results reported here change our view of House and Senate elections? In some ways, it is appropriate to talk about the Senate *and* the House. States are no more diverse than congressional districts and vice versa. Consequently, higher levels of diversity are not associated with higher quality challengers and higher candidate spending. The implication is that Senate campaigns are not more competitive because states are more heterogeneous. Neither the descriptive nor the causal analyses support this claim.

Voters apply similar standards to their legislators, contrary to claims that the House is service-oriented and the Senate policy-oriented. I found no difference in voter expectations about the two houses of Congress or in the reasons why voters liked or disliked Senate and House candidates. This suggests that voters apply a common set of standards when voting and that differences in observed voting rules are more a result of different levels of campaign intensity and political information flow than of different institutional expectations.

In other ways, the descriptive analyses support the conventional wisdom of Senate *versus* House. House members face inefficient media markets, yet

they benefit from districts with uneven numbers of partisans. The situation in states is reversed: efficient media markets but balanced numbers of partisans. This does not change the archetypal description of congressional districts and states, but it does restrict quite substantially the range of ways in which they differ. House incumbents are advantaged in another way: they face less well-funded, less prominent challengers. Even after spending is adjusted to a per capita basis, Senate challengers spend far more than their House counterparts do.

The causal analyses in chapters 5 and 6 compare the House and Senate in a different and more powerful way. Even though the levels of variables might differ (i.e., campaign spending or candidate quality is higher in the Senate), the relationship among variables might be the same. My results indicate that candidates react to the constraints placed on them by the political environment, and to each other, in comparable ways regardless of the institutional setting. The observed differences between House and Senate campaigns is a result of different starting values (higher quality, higher spending Senate candidates), not differences in the ways candidates interact with each other. These results do not change conventional wisdom about campaign spending but extend the results to the Senate.

In a similar fashion, the level of information that voters have about Senate candidates is far greater than the level of information about House candidates (particularly when comparing challengers), but the relationship between information levels and campaign activity is comparable. What emerges from these models is the central role of individual interest and attentiveness regardless of the institutional setting. Campaign information is like a rising tide that lifts all boats yet leaves differences between voters unchanged. Individual characteristics outweigh campaign intensity, campaign activity, and institutional effects.

The voting models further undermine claims that voters choose differently for the House and Senate. The descriptive analyses suggested that voters apply a common set of standards to House and Senate candidates, and the causal models reinforce this conclusion. A "simple model of voting" (Kelley and Mirer 1974) underlies Senate and House voting. Evaluative information about the candidates, as expressed in likes and dislikes, is the strongest determinant of electoral choice. In the absence of any recent information about the two candidates, voters rely more on long-standing partisan ties and overall evaluations about political conditions in the country and their districts. New information tends to trump old information. In intensely fought contests, respondents rely somewhat more heavily on candidate evaluations.

Future Challenges

While I have established the utility of a unified approach to House and Senate electoral studies, this study can be improved upon in many ways. In the interest of the author's and reader's sanity, copious amounts of data were ignored. Some additional data collection efforts could resolve some remaining puzzles. Other puzzles are more intractable. There is a gap between theory and measurement in the diversity measures. The endogeneity problem in campaigns has bedeviled this and other studies and is not easily solved. Finally, there are other places where this analytical approach can be fruitfully employed. I suggest some possibilities here.

Puzzles with Solutions

There are some relatively easy ways to improve upon this study by means of additional data collection. One improvement would be to add campaign content measures. I constructed an elaborate argument about the flow and content of campaign information but only examined flow. Without a flow measure, I cannot tie campaign information to voter learning. The difficult task is to collect comparably rich information about the Senate (not difficult) and House (difficult). This might be possible within a single election year, but it would be problematic for many years.

Another puzzle was created by small numbers of Senate races in a single year. Robust comparisons across the Senate and House are tenuous due to the small number of Senate races. Statistical estimates of institutional differences in the campaign models (chap. 5) were often statistically insignificant, but I wonder whether this is more a function of sample size than the lack of a real difference. One solution would be to expand the analysis of settings and campaigns into additional decades.[3] In a similar spirit, the voter learning and choice models are less convincing than they might have been had I included additional years in the analysis.[4]

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3. Palfrey and Erikson (1993) were able to put together a data set very similar to mine that spanned three decades. There is no reason why the census and media market measures could not be produced for additional years.

4. At a minimum, the election studies conducted during the 1980s could easily be added, although there is a significant absence of items asking about Senate candidates. Lack of comparable measures limited my voting analysis to the 1988 and 1990 waves of the NES/SES.

More Difficult Puzzles

Other puzzles are harder to solve. I focused on the relationship between diversity and campaign activity in the Senate and House. All I might have showed, however, is that diversity is not a way in which politicians think about electoral settings. There are other ways in which distributions might matter. And there are other ways in which congressional districts and states might differ that have political import but little to do with distributions as I have characterized them.

The *shape* of a distribution is as important as the mean and variance. Are there peaks and valleys? Is it unimodal or multimodal? An illustrative comparison is Illinois and Virginia, both of which have roughly the same proportion of African Americans (around 15 percent). In Illinois, African Americans are concentrated in two urban areas, Chicago and East St. Louis, whereas in Virginia African Americans are much more evenly dispersed across the state (with some concentrations in Richmond, Petersburg, Norfolk, and Alexandria). On my measure of racial diversity, Illinois and Virginia will have the same score. But the strategic situation for a politician who worries about the African American vote is quite different. A politician like the retired senator Paul Simon (D-IL) could appeal to urban blacks when he was in Chicago and still maintain his folksy rural image in southern Illinois. In Virginia, a politician has to be continually concerned with appeasing both black and white interests, no matter where he is traveling. Similar peaks and valleys occur in every state and probably more frequently in states (since they are larger) than in congressional districts. It is difficult to envision a way of gaining statistical purchase on this kind of observation, but it is obviously relevant.

I also remained ecumenical about the political impact of various demographic categories. A district that is split 90:10 white/black is treated the same as a district that is split 10:90. While it might not be necessary to lump all kinds of diversity together, as a summary index does, it is still possible to use our knowledge about political divisions in the United States to develop more discriminating measures of political cleavages. For example, I might want to consider overall diversity along with such specific types of homogeneity as high concentrations of Hispanic, black, rich, or poor populations. This would require a more extensive treatment of social cleavages in the United States than I have attempted here.

It is also possible that I have missed important ways in which the setting matters to politicians. Kingdon (1988) found that dominant economic interests were an important part of the complex constituency, yet I do not consider major industries or employers. Only one part of constituency tending is picked up by the NES battery of candidate contact measures. Fenno (1978) writes of

a congressman establishing a "fit" between himself and the district; Bianco (1994) discusses the complexities underlying "trust" and freedom of action by members of the House. How might this differ between the House and Senate? How might the representational relationship vary according to the structure of a congressional district and a state and the dynamics of House and Senate campaigns? One can imagine the real impact of size being the ability of House members to know important decision makers in the district personally, while the senator is necessarily more aloof. This will not show up in partisanship or diversity of market efficiency measures, but it helps House members cement ties, both personal and financial, to their constituencies.

There are also significant obstacles standing in the way of discovering the real impact of spending on citizen recall and choice. Incumbents react to challengers, and challengers react to incumbents. This simultaneity effect forces analysts to use complex statistical techniques when estimating campaign spending models and makes causal inferences about the impact of campaign spending difficult (e.g., Palfrey and Erikson 1993; Bartels 1991; Green and Krasno 1988). I also encountered this problem: my measures of challenger and incumbent spending and campaign intensity were so collinear that it was impossible to include all three in a single equation.[5] If campaign intensity is really a product of campaign spending and challenger quality, then any equation including all three will be misspecified and coefficients will be biased due to multicollinearity. And, because the relative size of the coefficients is a key part of the institutional comparison, coefficient bias needs to be taken seriously.[6] In the end, I agree with Palfrey and Erikson, who noted that "further progress in this direction necessitates the use of models that can disentangle very severe simultaneity problems" (1993, 23).

Other Institutional Settings

I have made two sets of claims here. First, I have made a set of assertions about House and Senate elections and tested these using data from the 1980s. I have also proposed a framework for evaluating the impact of institutional arrangements on elections. That claim remains untested. There are at least two ways to extend this study. I could turn to other elections in the United States, or we might turn our attention to cross-national comparisons. One proviso

5. In intensely fought races, the correlation between incumbent and challenger spending is over .90. The auxiliary R^2 on intensity is over .95. It is relatively easy to get a large auxiliary R^2 for a dichotomous dependent variable, but the high value remains a point of concern.

6. Zaller is able to ignore multicollinearity problems because he is interested in "the entire set of coefficients to simulate the overall effects of certain types of races" (1992, 236).

remains in force: if the goal is to estimate institutional effects, the cases cannot be *too* different.[7]

In the United States, these analyses could be extended upward to the presidential election and downward to gubernatorial and state legislative elections. One obvious and simple addition to the analysis is gubernatorial elections (and other statewide contests). All of the political setting measures are identical to the Senate measures; I would only need to calculate candidate quality, campaign spending, and voter information measures.[8] Political setting measures for state legislative districts would be more difficult to obtain since the census does not release demographic profiles for these districts.[9] The main problem with extending the study downward will be the lack of survey data for gubernatorial, other statewide, and state legislative contests. The situation for the presidency is reversed. A wealth of survey data on presidential voting is available. It is more difficult to characterize the electoral district as a whole nation. In both these cases, a comparative study of voters is easier to envision than a comparative study of political settings and campaign activity. It is still possible to test a unified model of voter learning and information, even while ignoring the other parts of the model.

My analytical approach should also appeal to comparative scholars of elections. I was purposely vague about the kinds of settings, electoral systems, and institutional arrangements that enter into the model. Theoretically, I should be able to compare across a wide variety of electoral systems as long as the differences are not yawning. For example, candidate reactions to an opponent's activity should be observed in any system that places single candidates in competition for a single seat (e.g., single-member, plurality systems). I could study the impact of institutional arrangements on voter learning and choice wherever there are multiple offices in contention at a single time (e.g., the French presidency and Parliament, the Senate and Chamber of Deputies in Italy,[10] or the Japanese Upper and Lower Diet). Comparative analysis of electoral systems holds the greatest potential, and the greatest complications, as I test the limits of a truly general model of campaigns and elections.

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7. I laid out a series of comparability tests in the opening section of chapter.

8. There is another good reason to compare the Senate and gubernatorial races: the setting is held constant. Only the institution varies. This should allow a more precise estimation of institutional differences.

9. It may be possible to obtain demographic profiles from the redistricting offices in the states.

10. Like the U.S. Senate/gubernatorial comparison, the Italian case is a particularly interesting one because the districts are highly contiguous.

Convergence and Divergence in the U.S. Congress

Richard Fenno, in *The United States Senate: A Bicameral Perspective* (1982), called for increased attention to the U.S. Senate. Far too often, "Congress" meant no more than "House of Representatives." In Fenno's judgment, political scientists needed to extend their field of vision to include the upper house of Congress. This was more complicated than just taking what we had learned about the House and blindly applying it to the Senate. A bicameral perspective is attentive to the ways in which the House and Senate differ and the consequences these differences have for elections, policy making, and the public profile of these two legislative bodies. Fenno's monograph stimulated a burst of activity among political scientists. The Senate became a hot commodity.

I was part of this movement, as a graduate student and an employee at the National Election Studies. My reaction to Fenno's monograph was different, though I still think in the same spirit. While there are innumerable ways in which the Senate and House in Washington differ, there are many ways in which Senate and House elections are similar. The bicameral perspective, in my mind, means specifying the ways in which the House and Senate differ as a consequence of the bicameral structure and also seeing what features they share. In the electoral arena, this means disentangling institutional accounts of elections from sociological and intracampaign accounts. *Institution* was being used far too casually: a laundry list of Senate/House differences (heterogeneous settings, more prominent challengers, more campaign funds, interested and informed voters) are often appealed to as an explanation of electoral variation. In this book, I unpacked *institution.* I tested many of these claims about Senate/House differences by contrasting institutional and other explanations directly and discovered that a number of our conclusions about congressional elections are wrong.

In the electoral arena, the indications are that the House and Senate are becoming more and more alike. With the passage of the Seventeenth Amendment, Senators as well as House members had to fear the wrath of the voter. Senate and House incumbents continually raise money, an average of $5,700 in the House and $10,773 in the Senate *weekly.*[11] Turnover is also roughly comparable in the two institutions (if you adjust the House figure to the six-year Senate electoral cycle). Candidate responsiveness to district features, opponents, and voter learning and choice show remarkable similarity in the two institutions. Thus, it appears that *both* institutions display "intimate sympathy with the people" (Madison et al. 1961, 337). Lack of responsiveness

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11. These figures were produced by taking average expenditures in 1998 and dividing by the length of the term. Of course, members do not raise money every week, but these amounts do point to the continual hold that campaigning has on our elected officials.

to public opinion is not a concern. Instead, the Founders' greatest fear—overattentiveness to public moods—may have come to pass.

Yet there are indications that senators are able to maintain some distance from the currents of public opinion. The longer Senate term and the greater prominence of the Senate do have an impact on the way that senators behave. The Senate term is split into a "governing" and a "reelection" phase (Fenno 1982). Senators strategically moderate as elections approach (Franklin 1993; Segura and Kuklinski 1991). As was anticipated in the constitutional design, senators are able to occupy ideological positions that are farther from the average opinion in their states than House members can. The major change that direct election of senators has brought is movement toward the district among those senators who are up for reelection. The House and Senate may be converging in the electoral arena, but they still diverge in their relative prominence and position in the policy-making system.

Elections in the modern era, regardless of the particular cases looked at here, have a basic three-stage structure regardless of the office. For those who look toward a more general model of elections, the results reported here are encouraging. Voters do not have split personalities, bringing to bear one set of considerations when pulling lever 1, another set when pulling lever 2, and so on down the line. It is more likely that voters apply the same basic set of criteria across many choices. Their ability to draw upon a wider set of considerations is conditioned by the amount of information they have been exposed to, and remember, about a particular race.

I do not think it is useful to talk about presidential, Senate, House, or gubernatorial elections as distinct archetypes. The question is when and why they look alike and when they differ. A generic language of elections, rather than talking only about institutional differences, should speak about elections are that are of high or low intensity, are held in heterogeneous or homogeneous districts with more or less efficient media markets, and involve high- and low-quality and high- and low-spending candidates. A theory of this type asks whether politicians and voters behave in similar ways across disparate political settings. It helps isolate the electoral impact of institutional settings. It should help organize in a reasonable and intelligible fashion a fuller array of local, state, and national elections.