

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Social scientists who study American politics have been called the last of the grand area specialists. American institutional arrangements are unusual in many ways: federalism, the separation of powers, a bicameral legislature, and a separately elected executive. Party politics also stands apart. The U.S. system is characterized by two parties and frequent alternations in power. Most parliamentary systems are marked by multiple parties and stability in the ruling coalition. The American public hews more closely to its party, at least as reflected in expressions of party identification than do citizens in many mature multiparty democracies, yet party-line voting, both among the mass of the public and in the legislature, is much lower. American political parties are socially diverse, non-programmatic, vote-maximizing entities, as contrasted with many narrowly based, programmatic parties in Europe, Latin America, and emerging democracies. We cannot understand what the American political system is unless we know what it is not. In order to really understand American politics, scholars must cast their net more broadly, comparing American institutional and political arrangements to those of other countries.

There is certainly a lot of truth in this position. American electoral studies would benefit from a comparative perspective. Still, the breadth and diversity of the American political landscape makes this a daunting task. The very things that make American politics distinctive also make it complicated: multiple institutions, multiple governmental units, and 250 million citizens. The first step toward a comparative analysis of American elections is to understand the similarities and differences *within* the nation. This requires a comparative analysis of elections at a number of different levels of our system: from the presidency, the Senate, and the House down to state and local contests.

Thus, it is ironic, for all the ink that has been spilt over U.S. campaigns and elections, that there have been few attempts to compare across levels in a careful fashion.¹ American electoral scholars have pursued their own subspecialties. A lot is known about presidential primaries, learning in presidential

1. Notable exceptions include Carsey and Wright 1998, Alvarez 1996, Atkeson and Partin 1995, Soss and Canon 1995 (all Senate/gubernatorial comparisons), and Krasno 1994.

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election campaigns, and the way that voters make their final choices. Many have detailed the reasons why congressional candidates choose to run for office, how these candidates react to one another when they raise money, how they spend that money, and the relationship between candidate quality, candidate spending, and electoral outcomes.

I was forced to learn about the idiosyncracies of American elections as part of my licensing to practice political science. But I ended up realizing that the same set of influences appeared in each of the electoral accounts I read. The same variables were used in the models: heterogeneous and homogeneous electorates, candidate quality, campaign spending, information flow, party identification, candidate image, and issues. Systematic changes in the political world, such as realignments, midterm seat losses by incumbent executives, or the length (or lack of) presidential coattails, pop up in voting studies regardless of the particular institution under scrutiny.

When I reviewed the elections literature, I was surprised to find diversity in the face of apparent unity. Not only did this increase the number of articles and books I had to read, but I could think of a host of reasons why elections should be similar across different offices and levels of the election system. Senate elections are more competitive because states are more heterogeneous—this makes it more likely that a senator will annoy one or another set of district interests and makes it easier to build a competitive support coalition. If true, shouldn't this same explanation apply to the U.S. House or even the New York state legislature? Other examples abound. House candidates spend largely in reaction to their opponents; shouldn't Senate, gubernatorial, and state house candidates react in the same way? Voters behave differently because they have so much information about presidential candidates. They should react in a similar fashion during other, particularly high-profile contests.

There are good theoretical reasons why candidate activity, voter learning, and voting behavior should show substantial similarity no matter what the setting or office. House and Senate elections ought to be brought under a single umbrella. I propose such a model here. I propose a simple, but comprehensive, three-stage model of the electoral process. I describe a small set of variables that characterize each stage. Finally, I tease out causal links between these stages to see if this three-stage model can help me better understand the American electoral drama.

The central methodological lesson that motivates this study is the difference between an argument about different *levels* or inputs and different *causal explanations*. Think of a causal explanation as a black box that translates inputs into outputs via some fixed set of rules. Obviously, if I vary the level of some input, the output will change as well, even though the rules of translation remain the same. The distinction between levels and causal explanations are

central to the aspirations of this book. I argue that political observers have been misled into thinking that observed differences in outputs—Senate and House candidate quality, campaign spending, and election results—are a consequence of different causal engines. Instead, I show how a single causal engine drives Senate and House elections and only the inputs vary across institutions.

The central methodological argument in this study is an argument for *pooling* House and Senate data. Obviously, I cannot gain much leverage on comparing and discriminating between two electoral institutions unless I have a common metric. Only by pooling can I find out whether district attributes such as heterogeneity of interests, media coverage, and campaign styles operate in a similar manner for both House and Senate elections. As a first cut, collecting comparable data allows me to ask to what degree Senate and House elections *really* are comparable. Are states more heterogeneous? How many congressional districts are similarly complex? Are all House candidates invisible, and how many Senate challengers suffer from the same problem? Do voters know more about all Senate contenders or just some high-profile ones. Perhaps high-profile House candidates are similarly well recognized.

Once I determine the metric and collect the data, I turn to statistical analysis. I treat the House and Senate races during the 1980s and 1990s, the time period examined in this book, as two independent populations. Then, via both graphical displays and univariate and multivariate statistics, I test whether a null hypothesis of no difference between the House and Senate can be rejected. A set of descriptive analyses, reported in chapters 3 and 4, provide impressive visual evidence that the House and Senate not only can be arrayed on single dimensions but that differences are statistically indistinguishable from zero. The null hypothesis of no institutional difference cannot be rejected. Next, in a series of regression models, reported in chapters 5 and 6, I show that some aspects of the campaign (I take a limited cut at the campaign) and most aspects of voter learning and choice display remarkable stability over time and institution.

The spirit of the work is captured well by Ross Baker's title, *House and Senate*, and his first line: "[A] sustained comparison of the House and Senate is something that most people assume to exist" (1995, 9). As he notes, truly comparative studies of the House and Senate are few and far between. Unlike Baker's study, however, which provides a broad overview of the House and Senate through the eyes of the members, this book focuses on congressional elections, asking to what degree House and Senate elections are comparable and in what ways they differ.

Thus, this work can be situated within an ongoing intellectual effort designed to unify electoral theory. If this effort is to succeed, the U.S. Congress is a particularly good place to start. Comparing elections in the U.S. House

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and Senate has a number of advantages. Both are parts of a larger institution. Calls for bicameral analysis (e.g., Fenno 1982) remind us to pay attention to differences between the House and Senate; they also remind us that the House and Senate are both representative legislative bodies. Analytically, there is sufficient variation across states and congressional districts and candidates and campaigns to allow the testing of a variety of hypotheses, yet there is also small enough variation that the project is not insurmountable.² Finally, I have a wealth of data on House and Senate settings, campaigns, and voters—census data aggregated to the state and congressional district levels, campaign spending data, candidate quality measures, and survey data—and a well-developed academic literature. If I cannot work toward a comparative model in a single branch of government, there is not much hope for extending this analysis across other institutional settings. If, however, the observed differences in Senate and House campaigns and elections are a product of similar influences, this sets up a series of signposts on the road toward a broad comparative model of electoral choice.

Why Compare?

Why do I think a comparative model is possible at all? There are good theoretical reasons to expect that voters use a common set of considerations when voting for the House, the Senate, or the presidency. Voting is a repetitive act, engaged in often (in some localities many times a year), occurring in the same setting (the polling booth), and requiring similar kinds of actions (pull a lever, punch a hole, or mark a ballot). It would be surprising if voters used different rules to make this kind of repetitive decision, especially since decision-making theory predicts that it is just this kind of situation that leads to standardized, routinized rules and behaviors. Similar logic can be applied to campaigns. Campaigns for any political office reflect the quality and nature of competition, the level of resources, and the political, social, and demographic nature of the district. From this perspective, if I choose very similar districts, regardless of the office being contested, major features of the campaign and electoral outcomes would be similar.

The logic of this argument is laid out more explicitly in chapter 2, but some elaboration may be helpful here. American voters cast their ballots in a bewildering variety of contests. There are few standing rules about what constitutes an elective office in the United States. My research assistants encountered this problem when coding “prior elective experience” for House and

2. Contrast this to either the presidency, where the setting is huge (the nation) and there is only a single campaign in any given year, or state legislatures, where the variation in settings is tremendous.

Senate candidates. Is the state treasurer a statewide elective office? Harder to code were the many state secretaries of commerce, a North Dakota state auditor, a freeholder from New Jersey, and the comptroller of New York City (all are elective offices, but the last two are not statewide). Do I expect that voters to use similar criteria across all of these offices?

The short answer is no. Voters will not use the same *criteria* in all circumstances since in many races some considerations are simply not relevant. I do expect, however, to find substantially the same *decision-making process* used across electoral contests. The difference between the two is important to understand. If I compare a contest rife with personal accusations of corruption to one in which the candidates focus on raising or lowering the property tax, surely I ought to expect voters in the first race will consider character while voters in the second will consider taxes. At least, that is all I will be able to observe in the final outcome. This does not mean that character is irrelevant to the second group of voters; it is just not a dimension on which they can discriminate between the candidates. Imagine a voter has a set of switches, and most of these switches (personality, party, issues) are turned off in a low-information, low-intensity election. The greater the amount and variety of information flow, the more switches are turned on and the more considerations enter into the vote choice. The switch box is unchanged, but the inputs, and therefore the outputs, can vary substantially.

The Necessity of Institutional Comparisons

The central problem of this study is how best to gain leverage on the switch box and not be misled by the observed outputs. One way is to make explicit comparisons across diverse institutional settings. Unless I move beyond a single institution, I cannot isolate voting behavior that in this case it is a product of state/congressional district from that which is a product of Senate/House. How different are states and congressional districts on those features that affect competitiveness (e.g., size, media market efficiency, and heterogeneity)? How different is the job of a senator and a House member and do voters perceive these differences? Is it the case that constituency service is more influential for House voters whereas policy opinions play a greater role for Senate voters, as Fenno (1983) suggests? Does the relatively greater prominence of senators versus House members that Foote and Weber (1984) notice translate into greater public awareness of Senate incumbents? It is necessary to consider House and Senate elections simultaneously if I hope to answer these questions.

I am not the first to reach this conclusion. Students of Congress often appeal to a laundry list of Senate/House differences in order to explain differences in campaigns and elections. Some stress variations in the political setting

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in which the campaigns are held, while others highlight institutional features or focus on the campaign environment and candidate quality (what I call intracampaign dynamics). Based on a reading of this literature, the archetypical Senate and House comparison might look like figure 1.1: two distributions of settings, campaigns, or voters with widely separated means and little overlap. This distribution conforms to the following accounts of Senate and House elections:

Senatorial constituencies (i.e. states) generally have much larger populations than the constituencies served by members of the House. In other words, senators must attempt to please many more people than representatives. (Hibbing and Brandes 1983, 810)

One of the reasons that senators are more vulnerable is that they may attract better challengers than House member do. States, after all, are generally larger and more heterogeneous, and have better partisan balance than individual congressional districts. (Dodd and Oppenheimer 1989, 2)

[T]he size and political importance of Senate constituencies [contribute] to the political visibility of individual Senators. (Abramowitz 1988, 384)

Richard Fenno, in his book comparing the Senate and House, writes extensively about the differences between House and Senate candidates: senators receive greater media coverage (1982, 9–11) and their constituencies are “more heterogeneous, more diffuse, and hence less easily or concretely discerned” (20). Scholars are virtually unanimous: states are more heterogeneous and complex, with a wider variety of conflicting political interests.³

These differences between states and congressional districts deserve closer scrutiny. There is too much imprecision about the relationship among settings, campaigns and candidates, and the institutional arrangements underlying these comments. Many of these authors do not specify what they mean by *heterogeneous*, *complex*, or *politically important*. Some social cleavages are more politically potent than others, so why not take this into account when assessing the impact of heterogeneity? I break district diversity into its component parts in order to test whether some kinds of diversity are politically more consequential than others. In addition, there are untested hypotheses underlying these comments that are relatively easy to examine. If “complexity” operates in some fashion to make Senate races more competitive than House races, it

3. Additional sources making this point abound (e.g., Pressman 1986, 66; Bernstein 1989, 83–86; Erikson and Wright 1989, 110; Alford and Brady 1989, 164; Parker 1989, 181; Hershey 1984, 167.)

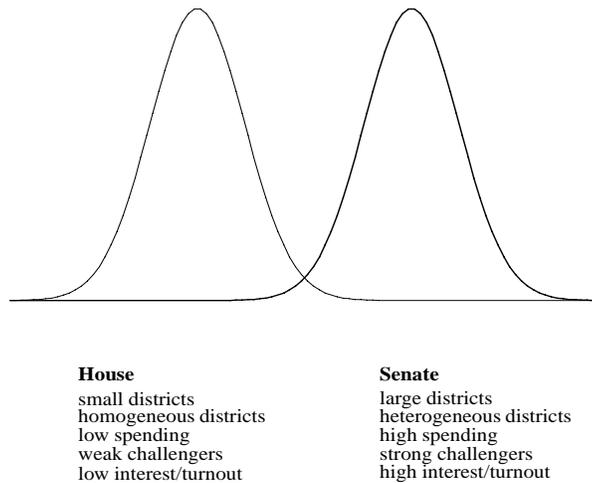


Fig. 1.1. Ideal type House and Senate differences

should operate in the same fashion *within* each institution. There should be more competitive races in more complex House districts and less competitive Senate contests in less complex states. Similarly, there is no theoretical reason why reactive spending by challengers and incumbents or voter interest and information in response to campaign activity should differ across the House and Senate. I evaluate the comparative impact of district complexity, candidate quality and spending, and voter attention in both the House and Senate.

The second reason why House and Senate deserve closer scrutiny is the kind of evidence—differences in the means—that is being used to support these claims. Focusing solely on averages is seldom a good way to compare things.⁴ Differences in means disguise similarities between the House and Senate. The average state is larger and more heterogeneous than an average congressional district. The average Senate challenger is better recognized and spends more money than the average House challenger. Yet this says nothing about how many states are as homogeneous as an average House district or how many House challengers spend as much as the average Senate challenger.⁵ The existence of states that look like congressional districts and Senate candidates

4. The difference of means test, taught in the first weeks of a statistics course, is based on means *and* standard deviations.

5. Even a superficial glance at demographic measures confirms that states are, on average, much larger and more populous than congressional districts. Does this mean that they are also more heterogeneous? The one study that has compared states and congressional districts finds only minor differences on a summary measure of heterogeneity (Bond, Covington, and Fleisher

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that look like House candidates, and vice versa, implies that I should be able to separate out the impact of district diversity, challenger quality, campaign spending, and institutional differences.

In one respect, the distinction I make between political setting and institution is specious. Senate/state and House member/congressional district are inseparable pairs. Differences between states and congressional districts are, in the final analysis, a product of *institutional* arrangements in our Constitution. However, while variations in media markets, population diversity, or candidate quality may be what our Founders had in mind when they designed the U.S. House and Senate, I do not believe this is what neo-institutionalists have in mind when they hear the phrase “institutional differences.” Comparisons across institutions helps generalize our theories beyond one institution—I identify the impact of the political setting on the generic event “campaign” without explicit reference to the institutional setting. Comparisons across institutions helps isolate the impact of distributional differences (settings, campaigns, voters), thereby allowing me to discern the true impact of institutional arrangements on electoral outcomes.

The Necessity of Over-time Comparisons

This study compares Senate and House districts and campaigns from 1982 to 1996 and House and Senate voting in 1988 and 1990. Pooling data over time introduces substantial methodological complications. So why do it? Studying events over time increases both the sample size and variation on the independent and dependent variables, thereby reducing the size of standard errors and increasing the precision of statistical estimates. Small samples of *contests* are a particularly acute problem when studying the Senate. There are at most 34 Senate contests in a single year. The working sample size of competitive contests involving incumbents can be reduced to under 25.⁶ A similar problem arises in studies of the House, but here the worry is a small number of *competitive contests*. Declining marginals (traditionally defined as any race in which the winner received less than 55 percent of the vote) means that fewer than 10 percent of all House races in any year might be deemed competitive (Jacobson 1997; Alford and Hibbing 1989).

1985). Similarly, Westlye (1991, 1986) found that voter recognition of a significant number of Senate challengers was just as low as for the typical House challenger.

6. Looking only at incumbent/challenger contests is often necessary in the House because of the small number of open seats. When I compare the Senate and the House, I limit myself to races involving incumbents.

The sample size problems can be partially alleviated by pooling across years. This increases the working sample size of Senate and House races tenfold (or higher if a particular year during the period was especially competitive). The costs of this strategy are fairly obvious: I lose the nuances of any particular year.⁷ There is another advantage gained by pooling years, however. In any one year, the greater electoral context—the state of the economy, the popularity of the president, the nature of domestic and world events—is fixed. Pooling over years means that I can be more confident that the results will not be limited to a specific historical context (Kramer 1983).

The Plan of the Book

Chapter 2 briefly reviews previous research on House and Senate elections with an eye to explicit institutional comparisons. I end with an overview of my own approach to the comparison.

In chapters 3 and 4, I explore Senate/House differences on a series of descriptive measures. In chapter 3, I ask whether states and congressional *districts* are really different and in what ways they are comparable. In chapter 4, I undertake a parallel comparison of Senate and House *campaigns and candidates*.

In chapter 5, I test a model of candidate quality and campaign activity, linking campaign dynamics to contextual variation. I try to directly confront a contextual explanation of campaigns with an institutional one. What makes this line of inquiry so compelling is that when the political setting argument is pushed to its limit, as I do in this chapter, what is left over is attributable to “pure” institutional effects. By considering political setting and institutional variations simultaneously, I am able to discern their separate impacts.

In chapter 6, I turn to the voters, incorporating my notions about the political setting into the voter’s decision rule. Those characteristics of the political setting which constrain campaigns also constrain voter learning and choice. The research proceeds along two paths: how voters learn about candidates and how voters make choices. I start with a description of the House and Senate electorates. Parallel to the analyses in earlier chapters, I ask whether the House and Senate electorates are significantly different. Are voter interest in and information about Senate elections significantly higher? Are House members or senators more easily recognized and recalled? Do there appear to be different sets of criteria that respondents generate when describing their House members (e.g., casework or delivery of services) versus senators (e.g., more

7. Krasno (1994), for example, opts to compare Senate and House elections in a single year. He provides more in-depth analyses of particular races than will be possible in this study, but is hampered by sample size and generalizability problems endemic to a single year study.

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policy oriented)? I end this section by exploring some interactions between the campaign environment, the political setting, and campaign learning.

I use the insights gained from my descriptions of the Senate and House electorates, in order to compare voter choice in the House and Senate. The second goal in chapter 6 is to see whether differences in information levels and voting decision rules between the House and Senate electorates can be unpacked into differences in settings (states vs. congressional districts) and campaign environments (candidate quality or campaign spending). In short, do differences between voting for House or Senate disappear once these other variables are taken into account? Since the focus is on potential institutional variation, I concentrate on testing a series of hypotheses about Senate/House differences.

Summary

It is not useful to think about the Senate and House as distinct archetypes. It also doesn't do much good to say that some House elections look like Senate elections and leave it at that. The question is how and why they look alike and how and why they will differ. Institution-specific descriptions of elections help us move toward a general model, but the danger, to use an overworked metaphor, is that we might lose sight of the forest for the trees. This study attempts to bridge the literature on House and Senate elections in order to discover the common elements underlying these electoral contexts.

Does a comparative study destroy the complexity that fascinates observers of American elections? Complexity often confuses as much as it fascinates; a focus on particulars can mask common elements. Social scientists prefer theories that cover a broad range of phenomena. In this spirit, a comparative model of elections will help political scientists identify those political and institutional variables that operate in a wide variety of electoral settings as well as to determine which variations cannot be accounted for. A comparative model of voting and elections will not emerge unless one attends *simultaneously* to the way political institutions, settings, and information structure the actions of parties, candidates, and voters.

This research tests the boundaries of comparative theory. I identify the components of a general approach to campaigns and elections. I compare the political settings of states and congressional districts more comprehensively than has been tried before. I use these measures to account for variations in campaign activity and candidate quality in the House and Senate over a two-decade period. In contrast to previous research, I do not take spending and activity levels as given to explain election margins. Instead, I explain why

spending varies so tremendously across states and congressional districts. Finally, I link campaign activity to voters, a link that has been far too hidden in many studies of congressional campaigns.

My intent is less to present a broad-gauge model than to propose a heuristic for understanding elections—a road map, if you will, for a complex and multifaceted process. By identifying patterns within complex informational environments, candidate pairings, and institutional influences, it is possible to specify conditions under which some major categories of variables matter and others do not.

Do the type and magnitude of these differences say anything about how institutions condition electoral outcomes? I show that the barriers to a theory linking House and Senate elections are not insurmountable. The components of such a theory already exist, but they have been masked by insistence in various scholarly camps on one kind of analytical explanation. Many of our electoral theories are implicitly comparative. I show that making these comparisons across institutions is not only possible but rewarding. They amplify the ways in which the House and Senate differ and the ways in which they are converging.

A generic language of elections, rather than talking only about institutional differences, speaks about elections that are hard fought or low key and are held in heterogeneous or homogeneous settings with more or less efficient media markets. A unified theory helps political scientists ask whether politicians and voters behave in similar ways across disparate political settings. It helps us isolate the electoral impact of institutional arrangements. Finally, it helps us organize in a reasonable and intelligible manner a wider array of local, state, and national elections.