

CHAPTER 2

In Search of a Unified Model of House and Senate Elections

Diverse and Common Elements in American Elections

The length, expense, and scope of American elections reflect the country's breadth and diversity. The 1996 presidential election, from the first announcement through the general election, took more than 18 months and cost more than \$500 million. At the time when I first wrote these sentences, in late 1998, congressional campaign committees were already being formed, fundraising dinners were being held, and polls had been conducted to gauge the state of the electorate—all this almost two years prior to the election of November 2000. In 1998, the average candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives spent almost \$600,000 on the campaign, while the average Senate hopeful shelled out \$3,500,000.

Individual contests, however, vary tremendously. House campaigns are held in 570,833 square miles in Alaska and in a few square miles in Manhattan. Senate candidates may have to appeal to more than 30 million Californians or less than half a million Wyomians. House members from safe districts may spend little or nothing on their election campaigns, while those in competitive circumstances raise and spend enormous amounts of money. The late William Natcher of Kentucky, who, literally on his deathbed, extended his record for consecutive House votes, spent almost nothing throughout his 40-year House career. In his final campaign, in 1996, he spent only \$8,000 (and, as usual, won handily).¹ More typically, Michigan congresswoman Carolyn Cheeks

1. Natcher was a fascinating member of Congress, not only because of his distinguished career and almost unbreakable string of consecutive votes but because his electoral history serves as a useful reminder of the limits of quantitative analysis. Studies such as mine simply cannot account very well for congressional careers like Natcher's, who won using a glad-handing, backslapping style that is disappearing in American politics. My work is intended to complement, not replace, scholars who learn about individual candidates, read their literature, and visit their districts.

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Kilpatrick racked up less than \$175,000 in campaign costs in 1996 while cruising to an 88 percent majority. In contrast, political newcomer Michael Huffington drew on his oil wealth to fund a \$5 million attempt to win California's Twenty-Second District seat in 1992. At least Huffington won—this time. He was not so fortunate in 1996, when he spent nearly \$30 million dollars in a losing Senate bid. Diane Feinstein's victorious effort was a bargain at only \$14 million. The totals amassed in that race set a record, albeit only until the 1998 California race, which was marked by newcomer Dan Issa's unsuccessful \$13 million primary bid! And it is not just newcomers who spend freely. Newt Gingrich, Speaker of the House from 1995 through 1998, and during that time one of the best known and most powerful politicians in the country, never had an easy time at home. His 1996 race was one of his least competitive, yet he still racked \$5.5 million dollars in campaign expenses. It is this very diversity (and cost) that makes American political campaigns an object of fascination for some and an object of scorn for others (Ashford 1983). It seems improbable that we could capture this diverse spectacle with a few variables and a series of equations.

At the same time, the tides of politics across space and time are remarkably consistent. The American party system has long been characterized by two-party competition with frequent alternation in power. Our current experience with divided control of the executive and the legislative branches is not unusual when looked at over two centuries (Fiorina 1996). Competition between the Democratic and Republican Parties has been the norm for 140 years. Even the fabled one-party South has disappeared: by the mid 1990s, no region experienced one-party dominance. The broad influences on presidential and congressional elections—incumbent popularity, economics, war, and scandals—have been operating in relatively regular fashion since at least 1896 (Kramer 1971). Perhaps de Tocqueville best summed up politics in America 150 years ago: “American society appears animated because men and things are constantly changing; it is monotonous because all these changes are alike” (1969, 614). Homogeneity and commonality of interest are the keys to understanding American politics.

Where does this leave electoral theory? A general theory of elections, one that applies minimally across a variety of electoral settings, should be within reach. Yet, after a review of the major milestones in elections research over five decades, Kinder and Sears concluded that “it is unrealistic and perhaps undesirable to hope for a single, coherent theory of political choice” (1985, 694). I would not want an electoral theory that is so general as to be banal nor so complex as to be incomprehensible. Nor would I want a theory that, in pursuit of generalizability across space and time, does so much damage to the particulars of local and national elections that what it explains is far outweighed by what

it misses. Still, 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, I propose an electoral model that identifies those political and institutional variables that operate in a wide variety of electoral settings. I specify conditions under which some major categories of variables matter and others do not. Diversity in campaign spending, candidate appeals, voter learning, and voter decision rules could be an outward indication of a common process linking candidates, campaigns, voters, and the electoral setting. In this chapter, I attempt to capture this process in a succinct but powerful way.

I do not propose a single, overarching model of political choice. Kinder and Sears are correct: a unified theory is either unattainable or would be impenetrable. Instead, I suggest a heuristic for understanding elections, a map to a complex and multifaceted process. In the next section, I describe a straightforward, three-stage view of the electoral process. I suggest a small set of variables that can be compared across electoral settings. I propose causal relationships among these variables. Finally, I show how I will use this model to make comparisons across U.S. House and Senate elections. In chapters 3 and 4, I compare the House and Senate from 1982 through 1996. In chapter 5, I compare a set of causal models of candidate quality and campaign spending, using data from the same time period. Finally, I turn to voting (chap. 6), estimating a set of models of voter learning, preferences, and vote choice in 1988 and 1990.

Three Stages of the Electoral Process: A Brief Overview

The electoral process has three stages: the pre-campaign period, the campaign, and the vote. Each stage has an associated set of variables: at stage 1, political settings and institutional arrangements; at stage 2, candidates and campaigns; and at stage 3, voter information and decision rules. I describe these here, showing how they help me understand elections, how they relate to one another, and how I will use these ideas to compare the House and Senate. Figure 2.1 illustrates the relationships between settings, institutional arrangements, candidates, campaigns, and voters.

The political setting and institutional makeup form the stage upon which the electoral drama unfolds. By political setting, I mean those structural features of an election district (such as the size, shape, and communication patterns, or what Fowler and McClure [1989] call “political geography”) and constituency (who lives there and what they want from government) that influence candidates. These also may be thought of as district attributes, and practically speaking that is how I will measure them. Theoretically, however, the political

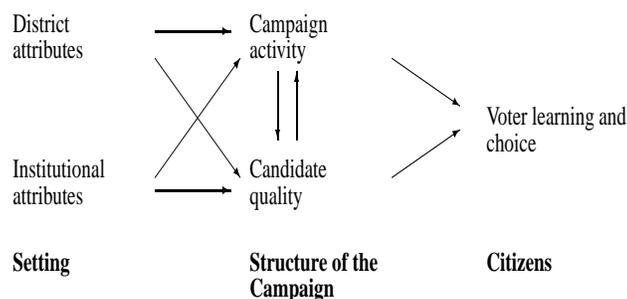


Fig. 2.1. Institutions, political settings, campaigns, and the vote: An exploratory framework

setting can mean much more, including the social and cultural background of an area and the history of social interactions and political competition. This kind of detailed social analysis is beyond the scope of this study and is difficult to comprehend on a national scale.²

Institutional arrangements are the ways the institution runs in Washington that have an impact on elections (e.g., term length, size of the parent body, and constitutionally prescribed policy roles). They influence the behavior of political actors but are not controllable by them.³ Thus, like on a stage, settings and institutions set up boundaries, or constraints, within which campaigners operate.

The setting affects campaigns in two ways. Any feature of the context that might lead to more competitive elections will be associated with higher quality challengers and more active political campaigns. One reason this happens is that competition feeds on itself: when an incumbent is perceived as vulnerable, higher quality challengers emerge and challengers spend more money.

2. The past two decades have seen something of a rebirth of “contextual” analysis, however, pioneered by the work of Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague (1995). These studies examine political behavior on a much reduced scale, usually a single city, but they are able to provide a far richer sense of political setting.

3. Congressional district lines and the makeup of the district are controlled by self-interested political actors, state legislators, and, indirectly, members of Congress (Gronke and Wilson, 1999). Similarly, members of Congress may change the “rules of the game”—institutional attributes—in order to increase their own chances for re-election (Mayhew 1974b). For any particular election, however, it is not inaccurate to place institution and setting outside the boundaries of political control.

When higher quality challengers emerge, incumbents spend reactively and increase their visibility in the district.⁴ Some aspects of the setting are associated with more competitive elections. For example, relatively heterogeneous districts contain a more diverse set of political interests. As a result, there are more opportunities for challengers to build competitive coalitions. This is just the kind of circumstance in which higher quality challengers emerge and both challengers and incumbents spend more money relative to their counterparts in more homogeneous, less contentious surroundings (Canon 1990; Jacobson 1997). I test the hypothesis that more diverse districts, more efficient media markets, and more evenly balanced partisan divisions are associated with higher quality challengers and higher levels of campaign activity.

The second way in which the setting affects campaigns is by constraining the kinds of campaign strategies that will be adopted. Campaigns need to be more active (advertise more heavily, schedule more events, and travel more extensively) in larger, more diverse, more evenly balanced districts. Admittedly, there are a wide variety of campaign strategies that might be successful in an identical state or congressional district.⁵ Still, this does not mean that *all* strategies might be successful in *all* settings. The makeup of the political district encourages some candidate behaviors and discourages others. This idea is related to what Richard Fenno, in the classic *Home Style*, calls the “fit” between a district and a representative (1978). I merely take this notion a step back to the setting of the election. While there are certainly other forces that influence the strategic decisions of candidates (in particular, national economic and political trends [Jacobson and Kernell 1983]), the district surely plays a role, regardless of whether it is a House or Senate contest.

Candidates also respond to institutions. How can I identify the impact of “institutions”? The facts are clear. *Ceteris paribus*, higher quality candidates run for the U.S. Senate—Senate incumbents and challengers, Democrat and Republican, all spend more money. These differences have been attributed to the greater attractiveness of the Senate as an institution (senators are more visible, the Senate is a stepping stone to the presidency, and the term is longer) and to differences between congressional districts and states (states are larger, with more even partisan balance and a larger pool of potential candidates). Again, I am left with an unsatisfying mix of accounts. States, campaigns, candidates, and voters are all on our list of suspects. Worded more carefully,

4. This also makes it very difficult to sort out cause and effect in campaigns.

5. Westlye (1986, 1991) believes this shows that political settings reveal little about campaign activity. Abramowitz and Segal (1992), in the most comprehensive study of Senate elections, similarly choose to focus on campaigns rather than characteristics of states. Lee and Oppenheimer (1999) and Brunell (1997), on the other hand, in recent studies of Senate representation, argue that context is important.

I reveal to what degree these observed differences in campaigns are a product of special institutional arrangements in the Senate and to what degree they are a function of differences between states and congressional districts. Once variations in settings are controlled for, do institutional differences remain?

Just as political settings and institutions set up boundaries within which candidates act, so candidates and their campaigns influence, though they do not determine, the choice process undertaken by the voter. At their core, campaigns are attempts to provide information that will sway voters to turn out and choose a particular candidate. I should find evidence of active campaigns among voters. Those experiencing active campaigns will be more informed about the candidates—their names, positions, and character flaws. Candidate expertise and prominence should be reflected in positive voter assessments. The first way that candidates and campaigns affect voters, then, can be measured by the quantity and quality of voter information.

Second, more information allows voters to employ more elaborate decision rules. If a voter knows nothing about a candidate besides his or her status as an incumbent or challenger, I would not expect policy or ideological opinions to play much of a role in the vote. In this case, the voter falls back on prior beliefs such as partisanship, general evaluations of the state of the country, or longstanding ties with an incumbent. When, however, the policy stances of both candidates are prominently featured in both campaigns, voters have an opportunity to take policy into account when they choose. Newer information communicated via the campaign trumps long-standing beliefs.⁶ The level and quality of information does not *determine* the kind of decision rule that a voter will use. A highly informed voter might opt for party line voting because his or her opinions all run in one direction; a less informed voter might opt for party line voting because he or she knows nothing besides the partisan affiliation of the candidates. However, on average I expect that voters employ a larger set of considerations when information flows are high. Alternatively, I might find greater *variation* in the kinds of rules when there is a lot of information available. At a minimum, the model outlined here predicts that the relationship between voter information and choice and features of candidates and campaigns ought to be similar across institutional settings.

In this section, I have only sketched the outlines of my comparative approach. I have focused more on the logic of the “arrows”—causal links—than the contents of the “boxes.” In the rest of this chapter, I flesh out these categories. I provide a more detailed description of the variables used in each stage and explain the causal models estimated in later chapters. These empirical chapters can be understood without reading the rest of this one, but some

6. The relationship between established beliefs and exposure to new campaign information is more complex than I describe it here (Zaller 1992).

of the theoretical underpinnings for my argument and my choice of measures will be missed.⁷

A Three-Stage Model of Elections: Theoretical and Empirical Background

Where elections are held matters. Any explanation of the political process needs to start with a description of the political terrain. Individual actions—running for office, selecting a campaign strategy, spending campaign funds, learning about politics, or choosing among competing candidates—take place within an electoral setting. For candidates, this terrain is what Jacobson (1997), among others, calls “context” and Hershey (1984) calls the “environment of political campaigns.” In the broadest sense, understanding the context means knowing the ethnic, religious, economic, and political cleavages in a country (e.g., Lipset and Rokkan 1967), the shape and nature of legislative districts, and how votes are translated into seats (Cox 1997). In the United States, a comparison of House and Senate elections starts with congressional districts and states.

Stage One: Politics and the Locality

I was trained in political science as a behavioralist. Thus, when I began this project, my motivation was to compare House and Senate *voting*. I soon realized that a comparison of voting must consider variations in House and Senate *campaigns*. And how could I account for differences in campaigns unless I went even further back, considering House and Senate *districts*? Each stage of the electoral process, in my mind, was intimately linked to the next. Of necessity, I had to start at the first stage of the electoral process—the political setting—in order to understand all the later stages.

Given this intuition, I was surprised to find the impact of political settings relegated to the category of minimal effects. In some studies, district characteristics are ignored. One of the best studies of congressional campaigning, *Campaigning for Congress*, by Goldenberg and Traugott, devotes only four lines in one table to “district characteristics” (1984, 36). The literature on declining marginals (Mayhew 1974b; Fiorina 1977; Cover and Mayhew 1977; summary in Jacobson 1997) and incumbent and challenger spending (Palfrey and Erikson 1993; Green and Krasno 1990, 1988; Jacobson 1997, 1990a, 1985) has

7. For many readers, my specification of institutional effects will be unsatisfying. I believe that this is inevitable given the combined demands of theory and data, but interested readers would be wise to attend to the section entitled “Testing for Institutional Differences.”

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little to say about the impact of the local setting. These scholars have taught us a lot about intracampaign dynamics (and I draw on these studies heavily in my own analysis of campaign spending), but they fail to consider whether variations in campaign spending across districts and states could be a product in part of variations in the political setting (independent of what the challenger or incumbent may be doing). These “minimal effects” findings would seem to be contradicted by a diverse set of research that relates state- or district-level ideology and policy opinions to a variety of performance measures. After all, heterogeneity is only a surrogate for the theoretical construct: diversity of partisan and policy demands among the electorate.⁸

Other comparisons of states and congressional districts have been mainly suggestive in nature. Fenno (1982) speculates extensively on the differences between congressional districts and states:

States are meaningful historical, cultural, economic, and governmental units in a sense that congressional districts are not. Senate constituencies are more apt to be congruent with media markets. The constituencies [senators] represent tend to be more heterogeneous, more diffuse, and hence less easily or concretely discerned. (11)

These differences are supported in interviews of House members who were later elected to the Senate (Baker 1995). Many of his subjects spoke of a sense of “intimacy” with their congressional districts that was lost in the larger state. Baker describes a state as:

a circus big top—lots of acts going on at the same time, a jumble of activity, cacophonous and busy. Some congressional districts approximate this theatrical model, but most are places where interests run in a narrower track, where a single racial or ethnic group may be dominant, where a handful of large industries account for most of the payrolls. (101)

Even with all these differences between the House and Senate, both authors recognize an essential fact: some Senate states look a lot like House districts and vice versa.

This empirical observation implies a possible strong version of the political setting argument: similar combinations of constituency characteristics will be associated with similar levels of campaign spending, candidate strategies,

8. One way that the electoral context has been brought back into the study of congressional campaigns is through interest in candidate ambition and emergence (e.g., Fowler 1993; Canon 1990; Fowler and McClure 1989).

and ultimately voter informedness and choice *independent* of the institution. As Fenno (1982) argues:

The effect of constituency size on campaigns can be tested, however, by entertaining the following proposition: Senate campaign styles differ from House campaign styles; but the more a Senate constituency resembles a House constituency, the more will that senator's campaign style resemble a representative's campaign style. (14)

Taking setting seriously, defining its aspects, and measuring it well are essential for understanding both the impact of setting and the effect of institutional differences. *Political setting* and *institutional differences* have been used quite casually in the literature so far. I try to sharpen their definitions in the next two sections.

Defining the Political Setting

The political setting is defined by characteristics of the constituency (who lives in a district and what they want from government), political geography (size, shape, and lines of communication), and partisan balance. I measure the constituency by the diversity of interests in a district, I measure political geography by media market efficiency and population density, and I measure partisan balance by the average vote over the previous four elections. I justify each of these decisions below.

Diversity of Interests

A key constraint on campaigns is the *diversity* of interests in the election district. Candidates and their campaign managers recognize divisions in the district and plan with them in mind. A more diverse district forces the candidate to appeal to multiple interests. This leads to the possibility of alienating one group or another, resulting in more competitive elections (Fenno 1982). Competitive elections are also more likely in districts with deep divisions on ideology and policy. Heterogeneity may also account for split control of a state's Senate seats: heterogeneous states provide more opportunities for building competing coalitions than homogeneous states do (Koetzle 1998; Bullock and Brady 1983).

Empirical tests of the impact of heterogeneity have been inconclusive. Alford and Hibbing (1989) show that state population size is related to the kinds of contacts respondents had with senators. State population is positively related to frequency of media contact relative to other forms of contact. On the

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other hand, population size has no relationship to a measure of opinion heterogeneity. Krasno (1994) finds no relationship between opinion heterogeneity (variance of partisanship and ideology) and a series of senatorial performance measures. While these studies make great strides in attempting to measure heterogeneity of interests, they are hampered by methodological problems in the survey data.⁹ Some studies employ ill-chosen surrogates for political diversity: population size or the number of congressional districts.¹⁰ I will show later that diversity of interests is not related to population size. The most diverse electoral settings are in fact congressional districts. The mixed results relating diversity to competitiveness may be more an indication of bad measures than bad theory.

I move beyond previous studies of the impact of political heterogeneity in two ways. First, I rely on more precise measures of heterogeneity. Rather than employing summary measures of diversity or heterogeneity, I unpack heterogeneity into its constituent elements. I examine those politically charged demographic categories, such as race, class, income, education, and urban/rural, that form long-standing cleavages in national and local politics. There is no good reason, either theoretically or empirically, to lump these divisions into a summary measure (see also Koetzle 1998). Second, I examine not just average levels of heterogeneity but distributions as well. The degree of overlap is central to my claim that I can compare the impact of district diversity in the House and Senate.¹¹

Media Market Efficiency

The information environment is a second feature of the political setting that has a bearing on campaign spending and voter decision making (Hinckley 1981, chap. 1; Goldenberg and Traugott 1984, chap. 8). A primary goal of an election campaign is to communicate information to voters in order to inform them, reinforce their preferences, try to change their minds, and encourage

9. The studies that used the 1988 National Election Study's Senate Election Study (NES/SES) study to measure state ideology suffer from the small and varying state samples. The NES/SES sample size varied dramatically across states, from a low of 32 (Hawaii) to a high of 89 (Maine). Sample sizes of 75 (the target) are already rather low for making point estimates; the variations in sample size makes these estimates even more unreliable.

10. Hibbing and Brandes (1983) speculate that an electoral district's population is negatively related to incumbent electoral success. Lee and Oppenheimer (1999), Abramowitz (1988), Krasno (1994), and Westlye (1991) all rely on a population-based measure (the latter two use the number of congressional districts in the state) as a predictor of Senate election outcomes.

11. More specific information on data sources, variable operationalization, and recodes are contained in appendix A.

them to vote. Communication can be facilitated or impeded by the efficiency of media markets where “efficiency” includes the ease and cost of reaching potential voters. Free media coverage is more easily available when districts are relatively contiguous with media markets because television, radio, and newspapers are more likely to cover campaigns when a relatively high proportion of their audience are also voters in a particular election (Stewart and Reynolds 1990). Challengers can spend their media dollars more efficiently when media markets and electoral districts overlap. In more efficient media markets, voters are more likely to report that they have seen a candidate on television and are less likely to vote for the incumbent (all else being held equal).¹² Prinz (1991a) found that market efficiency, while generally irrelevant for House incumbents, is an important determinant of House challenger success. One limitation of Prinz’s work is that, unlike Stewart (1989b), he is unable to produce continuous measures of market efficiency and advertising costs for the House. He relies on a dichotomy to distinguish efficient and inefficient media markets. Neither compares the House and Senate. If there is greater coverage of campaigns, and if candidates can more efficiently target their campaign dollars, presumably voters in efficient media markets will be exposed to more campaign information.

I compare states and congressional districts on their relative levels of media market efficiency. Overall campaign spending will be higher when markets are inefficient, although candidates could turn to more traditional modes of campaigning such as canvassing, leafletting, and personal appearances when markets are inefficient. To the degree to which market inefficiency does require higher levels of spending, weakly funded challengers should be disadvantaged. Relatedly, I expect that it is easier for challengers to overcome the recognition hurdle if media markets overlap with political districts and media advertising is relatively cheap. For all the reasons listed here, media market efficiency will be positively correlated with challenger recognition and success.

My operationalization of media market efficiency resembles those of Stewart (1989b; Stewart and Reynolds 1990) and Prinz (1991a, 1991b). I share in the weaknesses of both of these studies. First, there are no data available for newspaper and radio market coverage. My theoretical expectations about media market efficiency can only be tested in the context of television markets. Even though both House and Senate candidates are relying more and more on television advertising, the inability to represent all aspects of the mass media is a major drawback. Also, campaigns are not required to break down their spending into various categories, so I am unable to test the relationship

12. For results, see Stewart and Reynolds 1990, tables 5 and 8. There are several alternative ways to conceptualize “efficiency.” Actual calculations, as well as data sources, are reported in appendix A. See also Prinz 1991a, 1991b; Stewart 1989a; and Stewart and Reynolds 1990.

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between market efficiency and spending specifically on television advertisements. Unlike Stewart, I develop media market measures for the House and the Senate rather than just the Senate. If market efficiency affects the mix of contacts that respondents report, this relationship ought to be evident in both institutions. Unlike Prinz, who uses a dichotomous market efficiency measure, my congressional district measures are continuous, thus allowing a more efficient estimate of the impact of market efficiency.

Partisan Balance

The last feature of the local setting that I consider is partisan balance. No matter how advantageous the demographic and media market features of a congressional district or state may be, it is hard for a Democrat to win in a Republican stronghold. Partisan balance plays a central role in explaining campaign competition.¹³

Not surprisingly, many studies conclude that partisan balance plays a large role in the competitiveness of a state or congressional district (Powell 1991; Bond, Covington, and Fleisher 1985; Bianco 1984). States generally have more even partisan balance than congressional districts do, leading in some degree to the greater competitiveness of Senate races (Canon 1990; Erikson and Wright 1989; Abramowitz 1980) and possibly to split Senate delegations (Powell 1991). Like these studies, I operationalize partisan balance simply as the percentage skew in favor of the incumbent or challenger. I expect that partisan skew in favor of the incumbent will be associated with lower levels of challenger quality and lower levels of challenger spending in both the House and the Senate.

Testing for Institutional Differences

Is it reasonable to talk about institutions in a category separate from political setting? After all, it is no happy accident that states and congressional districts look different—this is the result of the Connecticut Compromise. Many of the features we associate with the prototypical senator (visibility, presidential timber) and Senate campaign (hard fought, high expenditures) could also be a natural outgrowth of politics in a large, heterogeneous political setting.

13. It is also important to include partisan balance because of probable covariation between partisanship and demographic diversity. Demographics may operate indirectly through partisanship. The redistricting process makes this almost a certainty. Gerrymanders shuffle citizens according to their partisan leanings. They also shuffle according to demographic groupings (Lublin 1997; Gronke and Wilson, 1999).

One way to proceed is to examine what the terms *institution*, *institutional analysis*, and *new institutionalism* mean to political scientists. Institutional variables are those rules, norms, and standardized operating procedures that govern the way actors (here senators and House members) interact. In the broadest sense, political settings are a consequence of institutional arrangements. Senators are elected from larger, more heterogeneous, and more media efficient political districts precisely because these features distinguish states from congressional districts. However, I believe that calling these institutional differences confuses rather than clarifies the issue. *Institution* does not generally include such things as district size, heterogeneity, or communications patterns.¹⁴

James Madison and his coauthors, if not the first, were among the earliest institutionalists in American politics. The Founders hoped that institutional arrangements in the Constitution, combined with assumptions about human nature and political action, would have advantageous consequences. Regarding the Senate and House, the framers placed great emphasis on the salutary effects of bicameralism. The two chambers were different in almost every respect: term length, size of the chamber, and constitutionally assigned policy prerogatives.

The frequency of elections and the structure of the electoral districts are supposed to give the House an “immediate dependence and . . . intimate sympathy” with the people (Madison et al. 1961, 337).¹⁵ The Senate provides a “restraining, stabilizing counterweight, . . . being the source of a more deliberate, more knowledgeable, longer-run view of good public policy” (Fenno 1982, 3). The smaller size of the Senate inoculates it against “yield[ing] to the impulse of sudden and violent passions” (Madison et al. 1961, 379). The equal size of each state’s delegation is intended to represent states’ interests alongside those of citizens (as reflected in the House). The six-year term was designed to foster political and policy stability—senators could focus on public policies that require “. . . continued attention, and a train of measures” (381).

If Madison and his colleagues were the first institutionalists, they have lots of company today. The major tenets of neoinstitutionalism, however, differ from the institutional features elaborated earlier. This discrepancy between institutional effects, broadly construed, and neoinstitutionalism is a potential source of confusion.

Political institutions are social units that channel political activity through rules, procedures, and norms; they provide a structure within which political

14. I have at least two allies in this terminological debate: Alford and Hibbing (1989) make a similar distinction.

15. All quotes in this paragraph are from the New American Library edition of *The Federalist Papers* (Madison et. al. 1961).

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actors can supply meaning to their activities. Cooper tells us that institutions are “planned social units that are created and structured to perform certain functions or tasks” (1977, 140). McCubbins and Sullivan define institutions as “the rules of the game that constrain individual choices and provide incentives for individual action” (1987, 3). Shepsle describes institutions as “a framework or rules, procedures, and arrangements” (1986, 52). March and Olsen (1989) do not provide an explicit definition, but their focus on rules and standardized patterns of behavior resonates with McCubbins and Sullivan and Shepsle:

Students of institutions emphasize the part played by political structures in creating and sustaining islands of imperfect and temporary organization in potentially inchoate political worlds. (16)

Institutions have a repertoire of procedures, and they use rules to select among them. (21)

[I]nstitutions constrain and shape politics through the construction and elaboration of meaning. (39)

The common thread in all these definitions is an interest in the constraints operating on decision makers acting within an institutional framework. The new institutionalists generally focus on the dynamics of the institution itself: how rules are applied, how norms develop and the consequences of various structural arrangements.

For many institutionalists, although certainly not all, it is less important how representatives get to Washington than how they behave once they get there. For an electoral scholar, however, the situation is not so clear-cut. An electoral scholar has to simultaneously attend to institutional concerns—chamber size, frequency of election, and policy prerogatives—and the nature of the electoral district—heterogeneity, media market efficiency, and population size.

If *institutional* becomes all-encompassing, then it is impossible to speak about political settings in a generic sense. Institution and setting are completely collinear. I argue that institution and setting are distinct conceptually, even if they are tangled empirically. Current usage of *institution* does not include such things as population diversity, media market efficiency, and partisan balance. Furthermore, it is analytically useful to keep institution and setting separate. Political setting explanations can help build electoral theories that apply across institutions; institutionally bound explanations, by their very nature, point out the limits of a general theory.

Effects attributable to the political setting are those effects that are a direct consequence of the nature of the constituency. There are a host of possible institutional differences—term length, size of the chamber, and constitutionally assigned roles. It is hard to produce empirical realizations of these differences. My strategy here is a more indirect one: I try to determine whether, once other considerations are taken into account, institutional differences go away. Under the strong version of the political setting argument made earlier, when all relevant differences in diversity of interests, media market efficiency, and partisan balance are controlled for, variables representing institutional differences should have no impact on campaign activity, candidate quality, or voter learning and choice. From a pure measurement perspective, I represent all the rich literature on Senate/House institutional differences with a simple dummy variable.

There is another way that institutional convergence can be revealed via my analyses. Institutional arrangements may modify the way that political settings affect campaigns and the way that campaigns affect voters. Thus, the structure of explanation could be similar across the institutions while the relative impact of particular variables changes. For example, I would use the same set of variables to predict competitiveness in the House and Senate but would not place the same weights on the various pieces of information I collected.¹⁶ The presence or absence of institutional effects, independent of differences in political settings, will be revealed via these analyses.

I cannot escape the charge, then, that my specification of institutional differences is sparse. A fine example of what a grander theory of institution might encompass is contained in Grier and Munger's comparison of PAC contributions in the Senate and House (1993). Even there, however, "institution" is primarily understood in terms of committee assignments, voting patterns, party, and seniority, along with what might fall into my "setting" category, electoral security. While I would argue that their representation of electoral effects is limited, they would surely accuse me of short changing institutions.

In my defense, my focus here is more on carving out boundaries—what does *not* seem to count as an institutional difference—than on providing a complete specification of all the categories in figure 2.1. I do not think that institutional differences count for nothing. At the same time, I do not believe

16. In the language of regression, the set of significant variables is the same across the House and Senate even if the coefficients vary. I would estimate such a model by interacting the dummy variable representing institution with each of the other variables in the model. This also allows me to identify which subset of coefficients changes across the House and Senate and which remain the same.

that they count for everything.¹⁷

Stage Two: Campaigns and Candidates

Stage two of the election process is the campaign: candidates and their campaign activities. Scholarly research on congressional candidacies and campaigning abounds. There are well-established ways to measure the quality of congressional challengers and their levels of campaign activity, and I take advantage of these where I can. Most importantly, however, I add one set of causal relationships and empirical findings. Following the three-stage models, I explore the *causes* of campaign spending or candidate quality, as a consequence of the political setting, rather than just looking at their effects, typically on incumbent reelection. Intracampaign dynamics—candidates responding to each others' behavior—are weighed against the setting as competing explanations of campaign spending and candidate quality. This way I can assess what helps us understand campaigns better: the relative levels of heterogeneity, media market efficiency, and so on of states and congressional districts or something inherent to House and Senate campaigns. As before, I allow for remaining institutional differences in the levels of activity and quality. Directly comparing three sets of explanatory variables—setting, intracampaign effects, and institution—helps me to identify the degree to which higher levels of candidate quality and campaign activity in the Senate are really a product of the relative attractiveness of the office and not a consequence of running in what are, on average, larger and more heterogeneous electoral districts.

Candidate quality influences the competitiveness of a campaign independent of other campaign effects. Experienced candidates know when to contest a seat and when to take a pass (Canon 1990). Higher quality candidates can more easily overcome the recognition hurdle (Hinckley 1981; Mann and Wolfinger 1980). Success rates in the general election are far higher for experienced or prominent candidates (Jacobson 1997, 1990b; Canon 1990). Candidate quality is included in my model of the campaign process.

Campaign activity is also part of my model. Campaigns inform voters about candidate names, policy positions, and leadership qualities. Campaign activity should reflect, as much as is feasible, all steps taken toward informing the voter and winning the election. As such, campaign activity includes both information flow—the information output of the campaign as reflected in such things as spending levels, candidate activities, and media coverage—and content—the relative weight given in the campaign and media coverage to

17. Recent articles by Grofman and his colleagues, most of which compare House and Senate elections, wrestle with these same issues: Grofman, Brunell, and Koetzle 1998; Grofman, Griffin, and Berry 1995; and Grofman, Griffin, and Glazer 1990.

issues, candidate features, and other campaign topics. Flow increases the likelihood that voters will be exposed to campaign information. Content reflects the mix of issues that campaigners are stressing and presumably has some impact on the kinds of considerations that voters employ. I include measures of flow in this study, but for practical reasons I ignore campaign content.¹⁸

I claim that candidates and campaigns react to the political setting. If this is true, then campaign activity and candidate quality will covary in systematic fashion with district diversity, media market efficiency, political balance, and institutional arrangements. The first step in the analysis of campaign activity and candidate quality is descriptive: are there enough *similarities* between House and Senate candidates to allow me to *contrast* institutional and other explanations of campaign outcomes? This may seem contradictory, but it is not. *Overlaps* in the distributions of candidate quality and campaign spending are necessary if one is to proceed with a comparative mode. For example, high spending by the challenger in House elections is associated with a variety of other events such as high levels of spending by the incumbent, relatively higher levels of voter information, and increased turnout (Jacobson 1997). I express spending in terms that are comparable across Senate and House races and examine whether high spending *in general* is associated with higher levels of voter information or whether this effect only occurs in the House. This comparison is not possible without House and Senate races with relatively equal spending levels. Discovering whether overlaps exist is taken up in chapter 4. The second step in the analysis of campaign activity and candidate quality is to see whether they are associated in systematic ways with variations in political settings. The expected pattern of these relationships are discussed next (the empirical tests are in chap. 5).

From Setting to Campaign

There is a wealth of research that suggests that candidates and campaigns respond to the political environment. I know, for example, that candidates for Senate seats are on average more experienced, more prominent, and spend more money (Abramowitz 1980; Ragsdale 1981; Hinckley 1980b; Westlye 1983, 1986). National political tides (popularity of the sitting president, the state of the national economy) enter into the candidate's decision about whether to run for office (Jacobson and Kernell 1983). It is also probable that candidates attend to features of the political district (such as ease or difficulty of gaining recognition, partisan balance, and diversity) when making the decision to run or choosing campaign strategies. In a heterogeneous political setting, it

18. Content measures for all contested House and Senate races from 1982 to 1996 would be very time consuming to collect.

should be more difficult for a representative to solidify his or her support since more interests to alienate and more opportunities for challengers to construct competing support coalitions. Media market efficiency pushes in the opposite direction, allowing candidates to spend less money and get the same message across. An even split of partisans encourages quality challengers and should be associated with higher spending levels by both sides.

I also expect that candidate quality varies with the makeup of the electoral district. One obvious time when this occurs is after redistricting. Redistricting reduces incumbent margins (Jacobson 1997) and is positively associated with challenger quality (Canon 1990, chap. 4). I do not examine redistricting effects here and only mention them because they can be thought of as another example of how changes in political settings can impact electoral outcomes. Instead, I concentrate on the influence of district diversity, media market efficiency, and partisan balance. I predict that more diverse settings, more efficient markets, and more evenly balanced numbers of partisans should be associated with higher quality challengers.

There are two additional components to my model of candidate quality and campaign activity. First, a model of campaign spending is woefully incomplete unless intracampaign dynamics are included. Political candidates respond to the activities of their opponents. Much of the driving force behind campaign spending levels is reactive; if you have a high-spending opponent, you will spend more, all other things being equal.¹⁹ Thus, I include the opponent's spending in my models of campaign spending, employing appropriate estimation techniques (see chap. 5 for more information).

Second, since, I estimate my models for the House and Senate together, institutional effects must be considered. There is good evidence indicating that campaign spending and candidate quality can be profitably compared across the House and Senate (Krasno 1994; Canon 1990). According to Krasno, once those features that supposedly differentiate the Senate from the House are controlled for—campaign intensity and challenger prominence—Senate and House campaigns appear surprisingly alike: “(D)ifferences in the aggregate largely exist because Senate campaigns are much more likely to be intense, and Senate candidates are more likely to be formidable” (1994, 114). Canon (1990) finds that the same set of “structural and institutional variables” (the makeup of the primary system, the size of the state legislature, the permeability of the political structure, and the “shape of the political opportunity structure”) help account for the appearance of quality challengers in both the House and Senate. Both results, while highly suggestive, have limits. Krasno only examines one year (1988), while Canon does not estimate a pooled model, nor

19. A large number of authors make this point; see, for example, Erikson and Palfrey 1998; Palfrey and Erikson 1993; Jacobson 1985, 1997; and Green and Krasno 1988, 1990.

does he speculate much on what might be the cause of the different patterns that do appear between the House and Senate. Still, Krasno's and Canon's results indicate that a pooled model of political campaigns in the U.S. House and Senate is not only possible but promising.

Stage Three: Information, Evaluations, and Choice

The final stage of the electoral process is voting. If political and institutional settings form the stage upon which the main electoral actors (candidates, parties, interest groups, and the media) play their roles, then voting is the final act in this drama. The story line for House and Senate as well as presidential elections has been much the same—economic growth and decline, presidential popularity, and rally events such as wars and scandals are strong determinants of aggregate electoral patterns. Thus, one might expect that voters evaluate candidates in a similar fashion and employ a similar set of considerations when voting across offices. These are only aggregate findings, however. The decision rule used by individual voters seems to vary by the office being contested. Where presidential voters rely upon a combination of partisanship, candidate evaluations, and issue opinions, House voters more frequently cite constituency service, casework, and candidate issue opinions when explaining their preferences. Incumbency plays as central a role as partisanship. Studies of Senate voting are an odd blend, some claiming that national policy and issue stances are more important for Senate candidates and others including a House-like set of contact and constituency variables.²⁰ What seems most likely is that the main difference between presidential and House voting is *information*. The presidential voter is exposed to a far larger amount of information (Alvarez 1999), and thus the presidential voter employs a more complex decision rule. The impact of information on the decision rule can be used to compare and contrast voting for the House and Senate.

First, I examine the level of information that survey respondents have about Senate and House candidates. There may be significant differences in *how much* voters know (are some House candidates as well known as the typical Senate candidate?) as well as in the *content* of that information (do voters feel differently about Senate and House incumbents and challengers?). My expectation is that once I control for a set of independent variables (heterogeneity, partisan balance, market efficiency, candidate quality, and campaign spending) information levels will not look all that different across institutions. After showing how settings, institutions, campaigns, and candidates combine to affect voter information levels, I describe my expectations about voting. I

20. Compare the series of articles by Abramowitz (1980, 1988) and Abramowitz and Segal (1990, 1992) to Krasno (1994).

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argue in chapter 6 that a pooled model of the vote is not only possible but reveals similarities between House and Senate voting that have been previously disguised. The pooled model, however, must take into account the diverse electoral settings from which voters come as well as particular pairings of candidates and their associated campaigns.

Voter Information, Evaluations, and Choice

Independent of institution, I expect that more active campaigns will result in greater amounts of information held by the voters. The kinds of information that are critical to candidate success are easily identified: recognition and trust. Therefore, the first way I compare voter information is by comparing relative levels of recognition and “likes and dislikes” across the Senate and House. Following the same analytical path as in previous chapters, I start by asking how distinct levels of recognition and candidate evaluations are across the institutions. If there is no overlap, the enterprise cannot proceed. Next, I test whether variations in recognition and trust are associated with variations in campaign activity and candidate quality regardless of whether I am looking at the House or Senate. Thus, I estimate a series of regression models, with voter information levels as the dependent variable, and my setting and campaign measures, along with individual characteristics, as independent variables.

Next, I turn to the actual vote choice. Perhaps Senate and House voters employ similar voting rules when the flow and content of political information are similar over the two institutions. This indicates that the place to look for comparisons is among comparable campaigns: voters in low-intensity Senate campaigns compared to the average House voter and voters in high-intensity House campaigns compared to the average Senate voter. Suppose for a moment that all citizens were exposed to the same level and mix of political information. In this case, only individual tendencies to seek out political information will determine how much an individual will know about politics. The distribution of voting rules will be shaped like a bell curve, where at one extreme you would find highly involved and interested citizens who take into account a wide variety of policy positions, character assessments, and even institutional roles into account when voting. At the other end, you would find citizens who are uninterested in politics, who vote at relatively low rates, and whose votes are determined by a few broad-gauge cues: party, incumbency, and the nature of the times.

This is obviously a caricature, but it is a useful illustration of the impact of increased information flow. It does not change the underlying distribution of citizens' political interests but shifts the distribution to the right, exposing more

citizens to a greater amount of campaign information. Thus, in a high-flow environment I would expect the less interested voter to behave like an average voter in a low-flow environment. In information poor environments, I would expect to find most voters relying on simplified cues, party or incumbency. In an information rich environment, voters still might rely on this simplifying device. However, with more information to draw upon in the campaign environment it is more likely that more voters will draw upon a larger set of considerations when they make their choices.²¹

The hypothesis for a Senate/House comparison is therefore straightforward. Under the “institutional differences” hypothesis, I should observe distinctive voting patterns, even after I have controlled away other effects. Under the “no difference” alternative, Senate and House voting will look quite similar once candidate quality and candidate spending are controlled for. If the latter hypothesis is confirmed, then observed differences in voting are more a function of the higher competitiveness of the average Senate contest.²²

While this will not eliminate the very real difference in Senate and House voting, it does place it in a different light. Theoretically, if we could somehow improve the candidate quality and campaign finances of House candidates, voting choice for the House might resemble voting choice for the Senate. This is in fact in the same spirit as those campaign finance reformers who, via a public-financing mechanism, want to bring House challenger spending up to the level of incumbent spending. The assumption is the same that I make here: if we can equalize the information flow about the candidates, then House campaigns will be far more competitive (i.e., more incumbents will lose).

Conclusion

Paul Allen Beck, reviewing a quarter century of electoral research, called for a reintroduction of context into the theory of voting:

21. See Alvarez 1999 for a similar approach.

22. The interaction between individual-level characteristics and information flow is quite a bit more complex than this model allows for. Zaller (1992) shows that individual responses to external information flows is the result of an interaction between the individual’s political preferences and attentiveness, and the amount and partisan bias of the information stream. This turns out to be difficult to replicate in a comparative model of the House and Senate. Zaller assumes that information flow in House campaigns is pro-incumbent, thus allowing him to use the simpler one-way information model. The same cannot be assumed about Senate campaigns: neither pro-incumbent nor pro-challenger information dominates. So, while my model reflects Zaller’s idea that individual and contextual factors interact during the voting decision, I do not employ his exposure-acceptance model here.

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No theory of vote choice is complete without specification of the impact of context. The Michigan approach to electoral studies and its revisionist competitors have identified almost every conceivable component of the electoral decision. Both the ordering of these components and their empirically based weights undoubtedly vary with contextual factors. Until this research path is beaten by many scholars, though, our understanding of the effects of context will be woefully incomplete. (1986, 269)

And Charles Franklin, reflecting on Senate campaigns, Senate candidates, and voter learning and choice, recognizes the interplay, and distinction, between institutions and politics:

These results should remind us of the dominance of politics over institutions. . . . [P]oliticians exploit the loopholes, as much as they are bound by the constraints, of institutions. (1991, 1210)

My study of campaigns and voting in the U.S. House and Senate builds from these two observations. Any comparison of the House and Senate has to take into account contextual variation within and across these institutions. Up to now, most studies have appealed to contextual effects without really specifying their impact. I attempt to do so here. By carefully laying out what is meant by “political setting,” I can assess its contribution to political outcomes independently of institutional effects. Context cannot be studied in isolation, however. Unless we also understand how actors pursue their self-interest within the constraints of district contexts and institutional settings, we are left with an incomplete picture of the electoral process. Heeding Franklin’s call, I hope to discover to what degree candidates for the U.S. House and Senate are constrained by, and to what degree they act independently of, contextual and institutional boundaries.

Settings, institution, campaigns, candidates, and voters have not been ignored by electoral scholars. Nor is this the first study to suggest comparing Senate and House elections. Where does my study stand apart? I bring previously disparate approaches under a single theoretical and empirical umbrella.

Some students of the Senate suggest that attributes of the political setting—population size, heterogeneity, and media market efficiency—result in different levels of competitiveness in Senate elections. Other scholars compare Senate and House elections, concluding that institutional arrangements explain different patterns of voting behavior. A third school eschews background features altogether, preferring instead to focus on the strategic decisions of campaigns and candidates. They conclude that Senate candidates are more visible, have more money, and simply run better campaigns than House candidates do.

It is impossible to identify the unique contribution context, institutions, candidates, and voters make to electoral outcomes unless we disentangle their separate effects. This book integrates what is known about district heterogeneity with our understanding of campaign spending and candidate quality. It links campaign activity to voter learning and decision making and directly confronts an institutional and sociological explanation of elections. It points to the possibilities of developing a broader understanding of how locality, institutions, campaigns, and voters interact to produce a final outcome.

The confusion surrounding institution versus setting epitomizes the central question of this book: to what degree is a comparative model of elections, one that will apply across elective institutions, possible? In order to determine the relative merits of an institutional versus a setting explanation, institution must be *separated* from setting. Without comparative analysis, our models might be institution specific. In line with Fenno's (1982) call for a bicameral perspective in congressional studies, studying elections across the House and Senate forces me to be explicit about what kinds of institutional arrangements lead to certain electoral outcomes. Aggregate data analysis cannot answer this question because aggregate analysis does not allow me to explore the *interplay* among the three stages—settings and institutions, campaigns and candidates, and voters. So, while I may be able to describe the different electoral outcomes in large and small states (e.g., Hibbing and Brandes 1983), I can only speculate about the reasons why population size affects elections. Many past studies that compared the House and Senate failed to *disentangle* the impact of institutional variation from variations in settings, campaign activity, and candidate quality. It is time for a fresh look at campaigns and elections in the House and Senate, using the schematic outlined in figure 2.1.