

CHAPTER 4

The Campaign: Quality Candidates and Campaign Funding

House and Senate candidacies include quixotic efforts by unknown challengers, poorly funded campaigns by reputable challengers, well-funded efforts by political novices, and, of course, incumbent and challenger operations that rival small corporations. Our political system is highly permeable, marked by the ability of new elites to enter at all levels, even contesting the presidency. One step back from the idiosyncracies of individual candidates and campaigns broad patterns emerge. It is the task of this chapter to unearth these broad patterns over the past two decades and assess their stability across the U.S. House and Senate.

My claim, laid out in chapter 2, is that House and Senate campaigns are driven by four factors: the nature of the electoral districts, attributes of political institutions, the natures of the candidates, and their political campaigns. I showed in chapter 3, that many states that look like congressional districts and many congressional districts look like states. Consequently, following the hypotheses laid out in chapter 2, there should be *Senate campaigns* that look like *House campaigns* and vice versa. Furthermore, I should be able to explain and predict these similarities.

In this chapter, I examine whether Senate and House campaigns are really different. I compare them on three dimensions—candidate quality, campaign spending, and campaign intensity. Senate elections typically feature highly qualified candidates, comparatively high expenditures, and intensely fought campaigns. House elections, in contrast, are characterized as noncompetitive, low-spending affairs with inexperienced challengers. As I have argued, however, focusing on the average case is misleading. Averages alone cannot help answer these questions:

- What relative proportion of Senate and House candidates are of high quality?
- Are Senate campaigns more expensive once the larger size of Senate electorates is taken into account?

- Once I control for different levels of campaign intensity across institutions, do institutional differences disappear?

All of these touch on the core questions of this book: what are the similarities as well as differences between House and Senate candidates and campaigns, and can they be brought under a single analytic umbrella?

I proceed by describing my data and measures. The discussion of candidate quality is brief, given the widespread agreement about its importance and measurement. Campaign activity is substantially more complicated. In order to simplify the analysis, I choose to examine one measure of campaign flow—campaign spending—and avoid content measures altogether. I discuss the implications of this decision later. Finally, I compare candidate quality and campaign spending levels in House and Senate races from 1982–96. I close with a discussion of an alternative measure of campaign activity—campaign intensity—and show how it is really a product of spending and candidate quality.¹

The evidence demonstrates, as will not be surprising to anyone familiar with U.S. elections, that Senate campaigns are more intensely fought, with higher levels of campaign spending and more experienced challengers. Nevertheless, Senate and House campaigns can be arrayed on a common metric. There is substantially more overlap on measures of candidate quality, campaign spending, and campaign intensity than might be expected. In particular, once campaign expenditures are adjusted on a per capita basis—a wholly reasonable procedure given the larger populations of many states—Senate and House candidates spend comparable amounts of money. In hard-fought campaigns, in fact, there are few differences between House and Senate in either rates of spending or quality of opponents. In the typical, low-profile candidacy—most often House contests—competitors suffer from poor political skills, poor resources, and, as I will show in later chapters, poor name recognition and little chance of success. On the other hand, in the most intensely fought races during the 1980s and 1990s, Senate and House campaigns look quite similar. The obvious expectation is that campaign dynamics and voter choice will display equal similarities. Those matters are deferred until chapter 5.

1. Campaign intensity deserves special attention because recent studies of Senate campaigns (Kahn and Kenney 1997; Westlye 1989; Sinclair 1990) and a comparative study of Senate and House campaigns (Krasno 1994) all rely heavily on an intensity measure.

Campaign Activity and Candidate Quality

As with chapter 3, this chapter is primarily concerned with description and measurement. The theoretical background and hypotheses were presented in chapter 2 and will not be repeated here. First, I explain how I determine what races to look at and how I measure candidate quality and campaign spending. Then, in a set of graphical and tabular displays, I show how the apparent dissimilarity of Senate and House campaigns is misleading. This leads naturally to chapter 5, where I bring together stage 1 (setting and institution) and stage 2 (campaigning) of the electoral process.

What Races?

The first decision that I have to make is what kinds of races to examine. Congressional contests fall naturally into three categories: unopposed (almost all incumbents), open seats, and incumbent/challenger. One set of races can easily be eliminated—unopposed. There is no point in comparing campaign spending and challenger quality levels when there is only one candidate.² Open seats are a more problematic category. On the one hand, if the aim is to select out a set of comparable contests, then open seats can be revealing. They are almost always fiercely contested in the Senate and quite often in the House. Unfortunately, they are rare enough in both chambers that any comparisons will be tentative at best (273 House and 45 Senate seats from 1982 to 1996, an average of only 33.0 House and 5.5 Senate seats per election cycle). I adopt a mixed strategy. I exclude open-seat races from most of the structural models that are estimated in later chapters, but include them in the descriptive analyses reported in this chapter.

That leaves incumbent/challenger contests as the primary focus in this study. I do not eliminate any cases based on either the amount of spending by the challenger or the final vote margin. As long as there is a challenger who is a Republican or Democrat, who reports some campaign expenditures, and who receives some votes in the general election, the race is included in the sample.

2. On average, 15 percent of House seats go uncontested (Jacobson 1997). The almost total lack of unopposed seats is a distinguishing feature of the modern Senate. During the period covered by this study, only four Senate seats went uncontested—all in 1990—even with incumbents like Sam Nunn (D-GA) and Spark Matsunaga (D-HI) rolling to victories in the 1980s and Charles Grassley (R-IA), Daniel Ikaka (D-HI), and Orrin Hatch (R-UT) posting 70 percent margins in the 1990s. This observation by itself is evidence of greater competition in the Senate.

Measuring Candidate Quality

A “high-quality” candidate can mean many things. A candidate might “fit” particularly well with the district. It might refer to fundraising prowess or a high public profile. One would hope that “quality” candidates also have a desire to improve government and formulate superior public policies. For my purposes, candidate quality is a way of capturing those features of a candidate that are likely to increase his or her chances to win the election—features that make someone a strong contender. It encompasses both previous political and elective experience and celebrity status, notoriety, or other features that lend him or her particular prominence. I include previous political experience because experience demonstrates at least some experience with organizing a campaign, appealing to donors and voters, and, hopefully, winning an election. I also consider celebrity status or great wealth, since these also help candidates gain recognition (or, in the case of celebrities, indicate that they are already well recognized) and attract campaign donations. Following conventional practice, I report both a dichotomous measure indicating whether the candidate has held previous office (Jacobson 1997, 1990a; Abramowitz 1988; Bianco 1984) and a more elaborate, four-point scale (Canon, 1990). There are more complex alternatives, some of which adjust for the proportion of overlap between previous elective office and current office.³ Krasno and Green (1988), the leading example, employ a six-point scale, but this complex measure considers 11 separate criteria. They worry about bias in the measure because some races may be more closely covered than others. Unfortunately, this concern has become more serious given recent changes in the coverage of congressional campaigns by the *Congressional Quarterly*, the most commonly used source. I discuss this problem later.

The dichotomous measure is coded one when the candidate has held any previous elective office and zero otherwise. Unlike Squire (1989), I give credit for any elective office, not just officeholding during recent years. The four-point scale, adapted from David Canon’s work, has levels for any elective office, other political appointments or employment (legislative assistants, party workers, etc.), ambitious amateurs (previous attempts at public office, previous success in primaries, great personal wealth), and others.⁴

3. In theory, this can be calculated for the House, but it would be practically impossible without sophisticated geographical mapping software. Squire’s measure has only been reported for the Senate; see Squire 1989, 1992; and Smith and Squire 1991.

4. I am grateful to Gary Jacobson and David Canon for allowing me access to data for 1980–86, and to Patrick Sellers for House candidate data for 1992–96. All data for 1988 and 1990, and Senate data for 1992–96 were coded by the author. Reliability checks were performed on 25 percent of the data coded by Canon and recoded by the author or research assistants. All

Measuring Campaign Activity

The nature of the candidates is one part of the campaign; the campaign itself is the other. I need to distill out some subset of the category “campaign activity”—I cannot measure every punch and counterpunch in over 2,000 campaigns across eight election cycles. In chapter 2, I argue that campaigns can be defined by flow and content. To simplify matters, I compare the House and Senate on only one measure of campaign flow: campaign spending.

In our candidate-centered election system, the bulk of campaigning is performed by candidate organizations.⁵ A measure of organizational activity will probably also be a good measure of campaign activity. My primary measure is money. Most of what campaigns do—travel, advertise, coordinate activities, pay staff, raise additional funds—costs money. Furthermore, it is straightforward to find out how much money is being raised and how much is being spent. Since the passage of the Federal Elections and Campaigns Act, candidates for federal offices have to file periodic financial reports with the Federal Election Commission.⁶ I deflate spending to 1982 dollars and adjust it to a per capita figure in order to take into account variations in state and congressional district populations.

Campaign spending is my measure of campaign activity. How much does it miss? One can easily imagine a situation in which there is lots of spending

coding disagreements centered on the definition of *celebrity*. For example, is Hillary Clinton’s brother a celebrity? There were only 14 total cases in which there was disagreement. The four-point scale is described in more detail in Canon 1990, chapters 3-4. Canon’s scale runs from 1 to 5 for Senate candidates and 1 to 4 for House candidates (with 5 being awarded for Senate candidates who had previously been in the Senate or the House or had held statewide office). To make the data comparable across the House and Senate, I collapsed levels 4 and 5.

5. While party organizations have reemerged in recent decades by some measures, they mainly play a service role in federal contests. Money, consulting expertise, and poll information is provided to candidate organizations. The amount of independent campaigning performed by parties is quite low (Herrnson 1995; Sorauf and Wilson 1990). Moreover, most party, political action committee, and individual activities—mainly in the form of fund raising—are channeled through candidate organizations.

6. The leading protagonists in the debate over campaign spending (Jacobson 1997, 1990a, 1985; Green and Krasno 1990, 1988) use early release Federal Election Commission (FEC) data taken from press releases after the election or published in the *Almanac of American Politics* or *Politics in America* (which also use early release information). Candidates have years to make amendments to these numbers, as new bills appear, old bills get paid, and the books are finally balanced. The discrepancies I found between the final FEC figures (as reported in data files archived at the Institute for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan) and the figures reported in the volumes cited earlier are sometimes in the hundreds of thousands of dollars (though these large discrepancies are unusual). I do not know whether these discrepancies make any difference in the results reported by Jacobson and Green and Krasno. In order to avoid such discrepancies, I rely on the final release FEC data.

without much information. In 1988, Congressman Dan Rostenkowski of Illinois, then the powerful chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, spent \$428,000, while his opponent's spending was too low to be reported. There are many reasons why Rostenkowski spent at such high rates: to discourage quality opposition (Jacobson and Kernell 1981); to boost his margin in order to impress colleagues in the House; and, last but surely not least, simply because the money was there. As chair of the main tax-writing committee in Congress, "Rosty" faced no shortage of willing campaign contributors. Does this indicate an information-rich campaign environment in the Eighth District of Illinois? I have my doubts. In contrast, during most of his storied career, Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin often spent less than \$1,000 on his reelection bids, yet he won handily. William Natcher, cited in the opening chapter, routinely spent one-tenth as much as his opponents, yet he did not face a serious electoral challenge for decades. In still other instances, a challenger may spend a large amount without ever gaining measurable voter recognition. To further complicate matters, the disbursements reported by the Federal Election Commission only represent *total* spending. Administrative and organizational costs are lumped in with information-providing expenditures.

This discussion raises a number of red flags about campaign spending. It is an incomplete measure of campaign activity and should be complemented by other measures when possible. Voters draw upon past experiences with the candidate as much as, and in many cases more than, the current campaign. Models of voter information levels need to take previous elections into account.⁷ Finally, because spending is not broken into functional categories, the relationship between spending and voter information will be attenuated.

A Digression: Identifying "Intense" Campaigns

Are there alternative measures for campaign activity besides campaign spending? Many scholars code campaigns according to their *intensity*. Westlye's pathbreaking analyses show that the intensity of a campaign is a key determinant of challenger success or failure. Intensity strongly influences voter information levels as well as the vote. Campaign intensity is obviously an important criterion for understanding Senate contests (Kahn and Kenney 1997; Krasno 1994; Westlye 1991, 1986). The problem is that there is no agreed upon way to gauge campaign intensity and the data source most often used to determine the coding has been changing over time.

Westlye codes campaign intensity by collecting descriptions about the races from various published sources and coding races as "hard-fought" or "low-key" based on this information. His main source for descriptions of the

7. This comes into play in chap. 6.

race is the semiannual special election report published by the *Congressional Quarterly* (CQ), supplemented with other written descriptions when necessary (such as the *Cook Report* or the *National Journal*). This is obviously a complicated procedure, although one that draws on a wide array of available information. Barbara Sinclair (1990) suggests a simpler surrogate for intensity: recode the “calls” of House and Senate races made by the same political observers at CQ.⁸ If either of these measures of campaign intensity performs well, they will be useful complements to campaign spending.

Unfortunately, there are serious problems with both. Westlye’s measure is based on published information that has been changing in both quality and quantity over time. Prior to 1986, the *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* provided a brief description of every House and Senate race. Starting in 1986, only the competitive or interesting House races were described. For example, in 1988, 90 races receive special mention, whereas by 1996 only a few dozen merited close coverage.⁹ A measure based on the CQ descriptions will become less reliable as coverage of House races is reduced.¹⁰

Sinclair’s alternative fails validity tests. She validates her use of the CQ call in 1988 by means of a favorable comparison with Krasno 1989 (one disagreement out of 27). It performs far less favorably in additional years, as is shown in table 4.1. The basic problem is that Sinclair measures the wrong thing. The CQ reporters gauge the closeness and intensity of the race as well as the likely outcome. While it is true that close races will tend to be more intense, it is not necessarily true that all intense races are close.

The ratio of incumbent to challenger spending is a third alternative measure of campaign intensity.¹¹ This takes advantage of what is already known about campaign spending—candidates spend reactively (Jacobson 1990a, 1997; Green and Krasno 1988, 1990). Ratios close to 1:1 indicate an active, vigorous

8. The “call” is a seven-point scale, running from safe Democratic to safe Republican. Sinclair (1990) recodes this as a dichotomous intensity measure.

9. One possible course to follow would be to assume that contests not explicitly covered by CQ are low-intensity races. This does not seem unreasonable.

10. Starting with the 1998 election cycle, two alternative online sources have become available. Campaign coverage on the *National Journal* web site, <http://www.nationaljournal.com>, does not approach the elaborate coverage in the pre-1988 CQ, but it is more extensive than that in the printed copies of *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* or the *National Journal*. The problem with National Journal site is that the content changes daily or weekly, so scholars need to monitor updates to the site. Second, Project Vote Smart <http://www.votesmart.org>, while it does not provide information relevant to campaign intensity, has a wealth of biographical and other candidate information that is no longer available in the printed weeklies or online sites maintained by the *Congressional Quarterly*.

11. Westlye (1991) and Krasno (1989, 1994) employ the ratio rule when their readings of other information on campaign intensity are inconclusive.

TABLE 4.1. Comparison of Intensity Codings: Three Sample Years

Year	Race Type	Westlye (1991)	CQ Call	Spending Ratio
1980	low-key	11	14	11
	hard-fought	17	14	17
1982	low-key	15	7	11
	hard-fought	15	23	19
1984	low-key	19	16	20
	hard-fought	9	12	8

Source: Westlye 1991; CQ call measures and campaign spending ratios calculated by the author.

Note: Races are categorized into low-key or hard-fought. Westlye (1991) codes are taken from the appendix to his book. CQ call follows the coding scheme proposed by Sinclair (1990). The spending ratio rule is to code a race low key when the incumbent or one candidate in an open-seat spends more than twice what the opponent spends.

challenge, whereas ratios greater than 2:1 suggest an incumbent swamping the challenger. The *ratio* is thus the gauge of campaign intensity.¹² This measure takes into account the variation across states and congressional districts in population size, media market efficiency, and heterogeneity. Westlye (1991), who proposes this measure, also notes some of its faults. By his reading, at least three Senate races between 1972 and 1986 are incorrectly categorized.¹³ Still, the ratio rule has much to recommend it. The data are readily available. The measure can be calculated as either a dichotomy or a continuous variable. If Westlye's intensive reading is taken as a guide, the spending ratio measure performs far better than an alternative based on CQ call (see table 4.1). Spending ratios also reflect in a more direct way the intensity of campaign competition.

12. In open-seat races, a spending ratio less than 2:1 qualifies as an intense race. In races involving challenges to incumbents, a ratio of incumbent to challenger spending under 2:1 qualifies as an intense race. Note the latter standard means that *any* race in which the challenger spends more than one-half the incumbent qualifies as intense.

13. These are Virginia, 1978, Warner versus Miller, in which John Warner spent "far more" than his opponent yet Westlye identifies this as a hard-fought race; and Wisconsin, 1976, 1982, William Proxmire in which Proxmire spent only \$692 and zero in his two races. As a result, the ratio of incumbent to challenger spending would identify these races as highly intense, whereas they were "among the lowest of low-key" (Westlye 1991, 23). William Natcher's House races would also be incorrectly categorized. For the period 1972–1988, the spending ratio and intensive reading agree 81 percent of the time (23). Four of the 19 discrepant cases were analyzed more intensively by Westlye. For these four cases, he feels the CQ reading was more accurate and the spending ratio classification would have been incorrect.

For all of these reasons, I opt for spending ratios as my principal measure of campaign intensity. I retain the untransformed version of the CQ call measure as a gauge of the closeness of a race.

Similar or Different? Comparing Senate and House Campaigns

Senate campaigns are generally described as more competitive, with higher levels of spending and higher quality candidates. Is this really the case? The average Senate challenger is more likely to have previous political experience than the average House challenger. On average, Senate candidates spend more money than their House counterparts, although once spending is adjusted to a per capita basis the gap between the Senate and the House narrows considerably. And the average Senate challenger is more likely to have previous political experience. The answer seems clear: the Senate and the House are obviously distinct electoral arenas.

The distributions, in contrast to the averages, tell a very different story. Many House challengers are politically savvy, high-spending candidates, just like the typical Senate candidate. Not surprisingly, the most experienced, best-funded House candidates are concentrated in the most competitive races. Similarly, as Westlye discovered in the late 1970s and early 1980s, candidates in low-intensity Senate contests are often just as inexperienced and underfunded as their House counterparts. By looking at the distributions rather than just the means, I show that Senate and House candidacies and campaigns are eminently comparable in the essential meaning of that term. They are not identical, but I can *compare* them on a common metric. I demonstrate this point in the next two sections.

Candidate Quality in the House and Senate

The distribution of candidate quality is reported in table 4.2. Higher quality candidates run for the U.S. Senate. Over the eight election cycles considered in this study, Senate candidates were nearly three times as likely on average to have held elective office (compare the “elective office” column in table 4.2).¹⁴ The least-experienced set of Senate candidates over this period ran in 1982 (though 1992 came close), yet even then over half had held previous elective office. In 1988, almost 65 percent had, compared to less than a third of House candidates. The much vaunted year of the outsider, 1994, was not a year in which candidates had particularly low levels of political expertise; it was just a year in which Republican challengers in the House knocked

14. Entries in table 4.2 include open-seat races as well as races involving incumbents. Uncontested elections are excluded.

TABLE 4.2. Challenger Quality in the Senate and House, 1982–96

	Institution	Amateur (1)	Ambitious Amateur (2)	Political Office (3)	Elective Office (4)	\bar{x}
1982–90						
All races	Senate	.10	.09	.35	.46	2.87
	House	.68	.04	.15	.13	1.74
High intensity	Senate	.06	.06	.29	.58	3.37
	House	.42	.05	.21	.32	2.43
Low intensity	Senate	.19	.21	.30	.30	2.71
	House	.76	.03	.13	.08	1.53
1992–96						
All races	Senate	.24	.02	.15	.59	3.09
	House	.67	.07	.10	.16	1.75
High intensity	Senate	.14	.03	.14	.69	3.38
	House	.34	.15	.17	.35	2.55
Low intensity	Senate	.39	.02	.15	.44	2.64
	House	.78	.04	.07	.10	1.47

Source: Calculated by the author (all 1990–96 data, House candidate quality for all years); David Canon (Senate candidate quality, 1982–88).

Note: The table covers races from 1982 to 1996. Entries are the mean value on Canon's four-point candidate quality scale. High and low intensity are defined by the ratio of challenger to incumbent spending. Entries in columns 3 through 6 are the proportion of challengers falling into each level of candidate quality. The final column contains the mean candidate quality score.

off many Democratic incumbents (although the crop of House challengers in 1994 was also of particularly high quality—see Jacobson 1996). Senate challengers similarly took up the anti-Washington cudgel. On the four-point scale, competitors for Senate seats during the 1980s ranked a full point above House competitors and a point and a quarter in the 1990s (final column of table 4.2). Overall, 54 percent of Senate candidates in 1982–96 (in all races, not just incumbent/challenger) had no previous political or elective experience versus 86 percent of House candidates. Krasno (1994) found similar results. Employing a six-point measure, he reports that “just 10 percent of House challengers were rated as 5’s or 6’s. . . . [M]eanwhile, 55 percent of 27 Senate challengers rated in the top quality groups, while just 11 percent were in the lowest” (94). Similar findings are reported by Jacobson (1997, 1996) and Mattei (1996). The Senate is a more attractive institution; it clearly attracts higher quality, more experienced (and, as I will show, better funded) candidates.

These results are unsurprising. Conventional wisdom states that the average Senate candidate is more experienced and better known than the average House candidate. One way to challenge the conventional wisdom is via a simple control for campaign intensity. Although large gaps remain in the quality of the average Senate and House challenger, there may be significant numbers of low-quality Senate challengers clustered in low-intensity contests. High-quality challengers, in contrast, may cluster in high-intensity races regardless of the institution. This is exactly what would be predicted based on the strategic politicians model of Jacobson and Kernell (1983), Schlesinger's (1966) ambition theory, and the candidate emergence model of Canon (1990). Experienced politicians choose races in which the chances of winning are higher; their fund-raising and other political abilities thereby create more competitive contests. The strategic politician and ambitious politician models are not limited to a single institution—neither should many of our electoral theories be.

A closer look at table 4.2 confirms these expectations. Many candidates do not fit into the convenient cubbyholes of conventional wisdom. In high-intensity races, there are substantial numbers of House challengers who meet the high standards normally associated with Senate contenders. Low-intensity contests, in contrast, are far more likely to feature low-quality challengers regardless of the institutional setting. From 1982 to 1996, 79 percent of the low-quality Senate challengers and 72 percent of the low-quality House challengers were competing in low-intensity races.¹⁵ Krasno (1994) found even more extreme distributions for 1988: *all* low quality Senate challengers and 94 percent of low-quality House challengers were competing in low-intensity races. There have been some shifts in recent years—like Mattei 1996 (40-42), I find that challenger quality in Senate races increased after 1990, especially when the seat was open.

Perhaps these figures are skewed by the impact of incumbency. Since campaign intensity is driven in large part by whether or not an incumbent is running, institutional differences may be more evident in open seats, where House/Senate differences in incumbency are not involved and the contest is more competitive for both parties. The patterns of candidate experience in open-seat contests, shown in table 4.3, bely this suggestion. There is little to distinguish the House and Senate throughout this period (I have merged the data from the 1980s and 1990s) other than the higher proportion of “no office” among House candidates (14 percent vs. zero percent) and the lower proportion of races in which both candidates previously held elective office (15 percent of races or 31 percent of candidates vs. 26 percent in the Senate). Senate candidates in open-seat races are of high quality, rating about a point

15. Low quality is defined here as categories 1 and 2 in the four-point scale (never held an elective or appointive political office).

TABLE 4.3. Candidate Quality in Open-Seat Contests, 1982–96

	Both No Office	Democrat No Office	Republican No Office	Both Held Office	Four-Point Scale
Senate	.00	.26	.21	.53	3.73 (0.65)
House	.14	.30	.22	.31	2.25 (1.39)

Source: Calculated by the author (Senate previous office, intensity); Jacobson (House, previous office); Canon (candidate quality).

Note: Challenger quality is the average value on a five-point scale. Standard errors are in parentheses.

higher than the average Senate candidate and about 1.5 points higher than their House counterparts. Still, the quality level of House candidates for open seats over the past 20 years approaches that of the typical Senate candidate (2.25 for the House in open seats vs. 2.88 for all Senate candidates). Given a highly competitive political situation—most open seats and high-intensity races involving an incumbent—differences between House and Senate candidates are substantially reduced.

What of institutional differences? In low-intensity contests, challengers are of relatively low quality in both institutions but far more so in the House. In competitive races, House challenger quality improves dramatically but still trails the rates observed in the Senate. Overall, then, Senate challengers are much better candidates for office than are House challengers based on what we believe leads to success in the general election. Controlling for intensity reduces the differences substantially, but important institutional differences remain. Excepting high-intensity contests in the 1990s, the average quality level of a Senate challenger is always a full point or more higher than that of the average House challenger. Another way to highlight the difference is to note that average House challenger quality under what might be deemed the best circumstances—a high-intensity election—is roughly comparable to average Senate challenger quality under the worst circumstances, a low-intensity contest. Even in low-intensity contests, 60 percent of Senate challengers were rated high quality, whereas approximately 52 percent of House candidates in *high-intensity* contests were equally ranked. Obviously, the Senate attracts more experienced challengers, in part at least because the Senate is a higher profile, more attractive institution (Baker 1995). It would not be surprising if the same patterns I observed are paralleled in campaign spending.

Change and Continuity: The Politics of 1994 and Beyond

The 1994 elections ushered in a new era in party politics, one so important that some suggest that the United States is in the midst of a party realignment (Aldrich 1999; Aldrich and Niemi 1996). The dynamics of congressional elections changed in this period as well. Redistricting and the creation of minority-majority seats, alluded to in chapter 3, significantly increased the number of African Americans, Hispanics, and women elected to Congress. These changes in district lines, combined with increasing Republican strength in the South, emboldened the Republican Party and led, in 1992, to the best crop of challengers in recent memory (22 percent of challengers in 1992 had previously held office; see Jacobson 1997, 155). From the state house to Washington, Republicanism was on the march. Furthermore, the anti-Washington sentiment of the Reagan era saw its full flowering in the 1992 campaign of Ross Perot. An era of the “angry American” voter seemed destined to fundamentally change our electoral system (Tolchin 1996).

There are many reasons to be skeptical of these claims. In large part, careful analyses of the 1992 presidential election have shown that economic discontent played the dominant role (and, relatedly, Clinton’s reelection in 1996 was driven by economic content; see Alvarez and Nagler 1998). With regard to *who runs for Senate and House*, nothing in the decade of the 1990s changes my conclusions. Challenger quality declined somewhat in 1994, and declined even further in 1996. As we have seen, the end result, when aggregated across the post-1990 era (shown under 1992–96 in table 4.2), is an overall level, and comparative level, of candidate quality unchanged from the 1980s through the 1990s. As important as it was, 1994 should not mislead us. The apparent success of amateurs, read in the media as the flowering of the Ross Perot, Jesse Ventura, anti-politician, anti-Washington fervor, was mainly a consequence of a few high-profile, amateur victories in the Senate, a wisely chosen Republican strategy to “nationalize” the midterm race, and anti-Democratic sentiments throughout the electorate.¹⁶

Campaign Spending: The Per Capita Solution

Candidate quality provides the first really significant gap between the House and the Senate. The gap is attenuated once campaign intensity is taken into account, but it still remains. Campaign spending is another area where, according to common wisdom, House-Senate gaps are unbridgeable. Campaign spending levels in the Senate are of an order of magnitude greater than in the House

16. These points are made throughout the articles in Klinkner 1996, including Jacobson 1996 and Mattei 1996.

74 The Electorate, the Campaign, and the Office

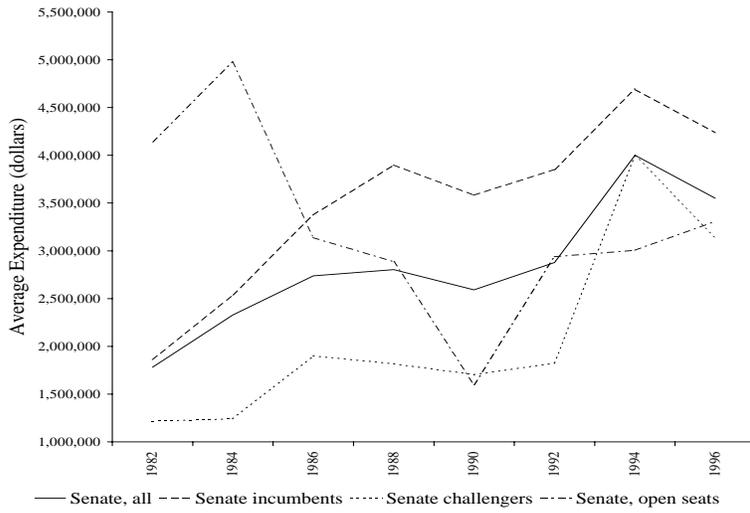


Fig. 4.1. Senate campaign expenditures, 1982-96

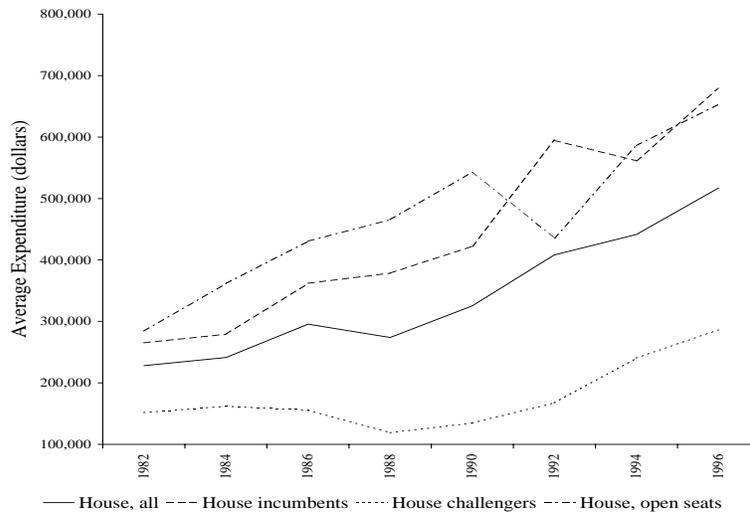


Fig. 4.2. House campaign expenditures, 1982-96

(see table 4.4), and this gap has not been reduced over the past two decades. The growth in campaign expenditures is less evident in table 4.4 because, to simplify the presentation, I report only two illustrative years.¹⁷ In figures 4.1 and 4.2, the upward trend in overall spending over the period is clearly demonstrated. There are interesting patterns in spending—for example, the decline in Senate open-seat spending from a high point in 1984 and a less pronounced dip in House open-seat spending from 1990 to 1992. I leave these patterns aside here, for they are the purview of far more sophisticated analysts of campaign spending (e.g., Erikson and Palfrey 1998; Kenny and McBurnette 1994). What these plots illustrate are, first, the dramatic difference in levels of spending across the two institutions. If plotted on the same chart, the House figures would appear as horizontal lines at the bottom of the graphic. Second, these charts show, via rough eyeballing, that trends in spending follow the same path across institutions. Overall spending climbed at a fairly steady rate. The two series are correlated at .85, and the House series has a steeper slope.¹⁸ For both institutions, challenger spending lags incumbent spending significantly (excepting 1994 in the Senate). Open-seat spending dipped for both, though more severely for the Senate.

I have shown in previous chapters, however, that some House/Senate differences are a function of nothing more than size. This is probably in large part due to differences in the electoral setting: states are, on average, much larger and more populous than congressional districts.¹⁹ Whether these constitute a significant *institutional* difference is, of course, open to debate (see Baker 1995 for a strong argument that they do). Congressional campaigns, however, are at least in part an attempt to convince a fixed set of voters, regardless of whether they be 50 million Californians or 500,000 Nevadans in the First District. How much do Senate and House candidates spend per voter?

When campaign spending is expressed on a per capita basis, the House and Senate gap is dramatically reduced. In figures 4.1 and 4.2, House and Senate had to be plotted separately because the scales were so disparate. In figure 4.3, I can easily plot House and Senate together. Throughout the period, spending in Senate campaigns was approximately twice as great as spending in House

17. Neither was chosen because it represents a particularly distinctive year for spending. In chapter 6, 1988 is one of the two years examined intensively, and 1994 is the most recent midterm year (at the time of this writing) for purposes of comparison.

18. Assuming that the two are fixed at an order of magnitude, the House slope should be one-tenth the Senate slope. The predicted increase in spending during each two-year election cycle, based on these figures, is \$40,000 for the House and \$250,000 for the Senate.

19. Within the Senate, campaign spending is positively correlated with population size (.474 for Democratic candidates, .431 for Republican candidates).

TABLE 4.4. Campaign Spending in the Senate and House (in dollars)

	Senate	House
1988		
All Candidates	2,802,118	273,811
Democrats	2,934,817	287,560
Republicans	2,669,420	258,441
Incumbents	3,898,821	378,316
Challengers	1,816,113	118,877
1994		
All candidates	4,000,274	441,378
Democrats	3,395,629	487,493
Republicans	4,604,919	396,411
Incumbents	4,691,617	561,441
Challengers	3,997,104	240,188

Source: Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin 1998.

campaigns (see also col. 1 of table 4.5). Furthermore, just as we discovered when examining candidate quality, House incumbents look an awful lot like Senate challengers once campaign is adjusted. Finally, although it is risky to project too far into the future, the trends in the lines indicate that House incumbent spending is approaching Senate incumbent spending, while Senate challenger spending is approaching House challenger spending.²⁰

Still, the standard deviations attached to these figures, reported in the second column of table 4.5, suggest that substantial numbers of House members will spend at Senate rates and vice versa. Figures 4.4 and 4.5 reinforce this point. The *distribution* of total spending is roughly comparable in the Senate and House, except for the larger proportion of Senate races with spending rates over two dollars per capita, and there are significant overlaps in both directions.

Spending by incumbents and challengers in the Senate and House follows many of the same patterns we saw in chapter 3. While Senate candidates spend two to three times as much as their House counterparts, with much wider variations in Senate spending, the highest spending contest was in the House, \$9.50 per capita by incumbent Newt Gingrich (R-GA) in 1996. His opponent, Michael Coles, spent \$3.3 million, \$5.66 per capita. Given that most members of Georgia's Sixth District already recognized Gingrich's name and knew

20. In fact, what is happening is that Senate spending in all races, once adjusted to a per capita basis, basically has been flat since 1988, while House spending continues to increase.

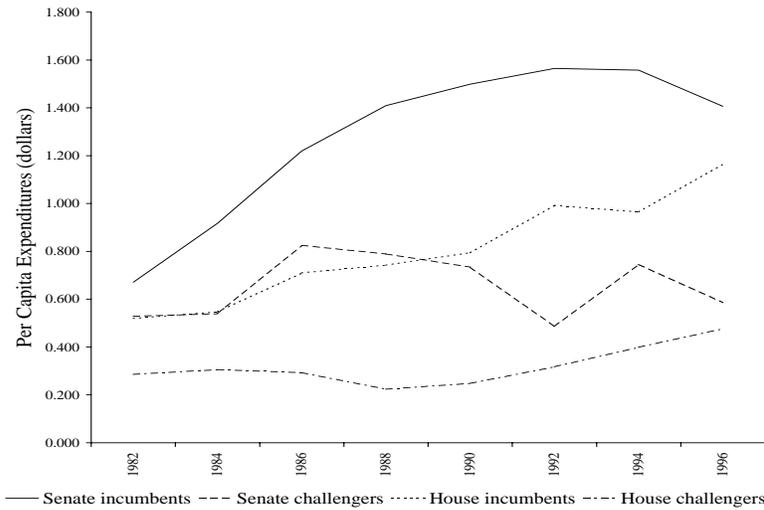


Fig. 4.3. Per capita campaign expenditures, 1982–96

TABLE 4.5. Per Capita Campaign Spending in the House and Senate

Institution and Race Type	Per Capita Spending	(Standard Deviation)	Min.	Max.
1982–1988				
House Incumbents	.633	.465	.009	5.074
House Challengers	.221	.367	.008	4.447
Senate Incumbents	1.066	.938	.001	4.937
Senate Challengers	.644	.924	.000	6.184
1990–1996				
House Incumbents	.917	.627	.000	9.487
House Challengers	.326	.522	.000	8.229
Senate Incumbents	1.539	1.181	.196	5.721
Senate Challengers	.657	.759	.001	3.331

Source: Calculated by the author from Federal Election Commission and Census data.

his positions, one wonders about characterizing this campaign as “information rich.” Just to compare, the highest spending Senate candidate on a per capita basis in this period was challenger Tom Daschle (D-SD) who spent \$5.50 per

78 The Electorate, the Campaign, and the Office

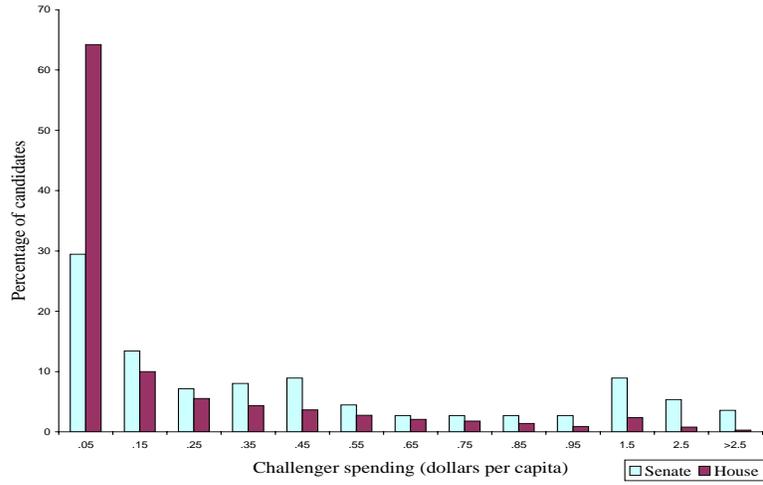


Fig. 4.4. Campaign spending for challengers, 1982–96, per capita

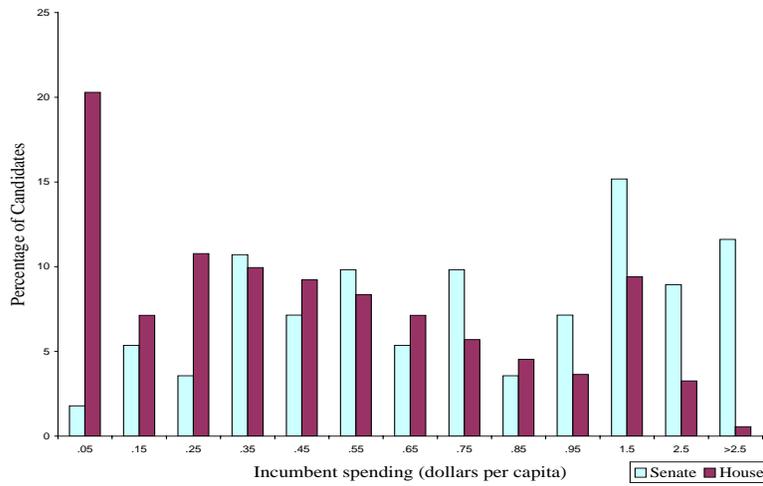


Fig. 4.5. Campaign spending for incumbents, 1982–96, per capita

capita in 1986; the highest spending incumbent was his opponent, Republican Senator James Abdnor (\$4.94 per capita).²¹

The gap between House and Senate challenger spending was larger than the gap between House and Senate incumbents. On average, Senate challengers spent 140 percent of what a typical House challenger spent, with the gap increasing to over 250 percent in since 1988. Considering that these figures *already* take into account the larger size of a typical Senate electoral district, the gaps are large indeed. Furthermore, there is an undeniable difference across institutions in the distribution of incumbent and challenger spending (shown in figs. 4.4 and 4.5). Nearly 20 percent of House incumbents have the luxury of spending minimal amounts. Less than 15 percent of House incumbents spend more than one dollar per capita. Senate incumbents seldom have this freedom—more than a third of Senate incumbents spend more than a dollar per capita. The same institutional distinction applies to challengers—there are more House challengers spending at minimal levels and more Senate challengers spending at high levels. It appears, then, that the same differences I observed in candidate quality reemerge for campaign spending. The next step is to apply controls for open seats and campaign intensity.

A brief look at spending in open-seat races fails to dispel the conclusion that Senate campaigns are harder fought than House campaigns. The comparative spending rates in open-seat races, shown in table 4.6, are surprisingly similar to the rates for all races. Once transformed into a per capita measure, relative spending by Senate and House Democratic candidates for open seats retains the pattern observed earlier, although the gap is smaller. Democratic candidates for open Senate seats spend 53 percent more than Democratic candidates in the House. Republican Senate candidates, however, spend only 20 percent more than Republican House candidates. Both of these sets of figures are much closer than what I observed overall (table 4.5), but of course examining open seats is analogous to a sample of the most competitive races. Roughly speaking, the set of open-seat races in the House and Senate look “more alike” than the set of all races in the House and Senate.

What does this mean? Do open-seat contests have special features that tell me something about the ability to compare House and Senate campaign dynamics? Open-seat races are among the most competitive. Average spending is higher (compare table 4.4 to rows 1 and 2 of table 4.5). Candidates for

21. The overall spending record is held by Michael Huffington, whose losing California Senate contest, in 1994, reported expenditures of nearly \$30 million. Dianne Feinstein was the victor (\$14 million). Since California has almost 30 million citizens, the per capita expense was relatively low. The most spent ever per capita by a losing candidate was in the House. In 1994, Republican Gene Fontenot spent \$4.6 million in a losing effort to unseat incumbent Ken Bentsen (D-TX), who spent a paltry \$972,688.

TABLE 4.6. Open Seat Spending (in dollars)

	Senate	House
Democrats, 1982–96	3,745,380	356,691
Republicans, 1982–96	3,471,070	383,646
Democrats, per capita	1.062 (1.367)	.692 (.545)
Republicans, per capita	.888 (.744)	.744 (.544)

Source: Federal Election Commission.

Note: Entries are average spending in contested open-seat races over the 1982–96 period, deflated to 1982 dollars.

open seats tend to be of higher quality and are better liked than candidates who are challenging incumbents (Canon 1990; Jacobson 1997). Margins in open-seat elections are much smaller than in elections involving incumbents. Open-seat contests, then, are among the most hotly contested races, exactly the characteristics that Westlye (1991) calls “hard-fought.”

Senate/House differences in per capita spending are reduced substantially once I select out open-seat races. The logical extension of this result is that Senate/House differences on a wide variety of campaign measures (campaign spending, candidate quality) and potentially voting measures as well (information levels, decision rules) will disappear once campaign intensity is taken into account. I showed in chapter 3 that the likely sources of differences in *campaigns* between the Senate and House are partisan divisions and media market efficiency. Other measures of demographic diversity provided little empirical purchase as a way to discriminate between or within the institutions. The results in this chapter indicate that campaign intensity is a likely source of differences in *voting* between the House and Senate.

The Intensity Puzzle

Campaign intensity matters—this is no surprise. As electoral analysts, however, we are left on the horns of a dilemma. Candidate quality, campaign spending, and campaign intensity are all endogenous. High-intensity races, almost by definition, feature high-spending candidates. If both candidates spend a lot of money, the race will probably be defined as “intense.” Elections are more competitive *because* higher quality candidates are running. Candidates can raise more funds *because* they pose a serious challenge. As Jacobson has argued (1990b), Republican prospects in the House during the 1980s were poor in large part because Republican challengers were of low quality: “[Y]ou can’t beat somebody with nobody.” This does not undermine the validity of

comparing Senate and House races, but it does make the findings less clear. It is not surprising to find higher quality challengers and higher spending in more competitive races—the challengers and their spending are what made them competitive.

What does this mean for the qualitative coding of campaign intensity? Westlye (1983, 1996, 1991) and Krasno (1994) draw on a number of features of the campaign in order to determine intensity. Suppose that a candidate is taken seriously by the electorate if he or she passes one of two thresholds, either spending at least half what the opponent is spending or having previous political experience. This means that “hard-fought” races are a product of the interaction of spending and candidate quality. We have no way of knowing whether a campaign is coded “hard fought” because of a highly qualified contender, successful fund raising by one or both candidates, a particularly vulnerable incumbent, or some combination of these. A model that includes intensity, candidate quality, and spending ratios might be misspecified.

I can test for this possibility. If intensity is largely a function of candidate quality and spending ratios, I should be able to predict intensity codings with a high level of accuracy. In table 4.7, I do precisely this, regressing intensity on quality and spending for the House in 1988 (eq. 1), the Senate in 1982-84 and 1988 (eq. 2), and the House and Senate pooled. The dependent variable is the intensity codes reported in Krasno 1994 and Westlye 1986. The results in equation 1 reinforce my suspicions: intensity is strongly associated with candidate quality and the ratio of spending. All coefficients meet conventional levels of statistical significance and are signed correctly. This is not a surprising result. CQ’s political columnists look at candidates and spending levels when they write their descriptions of a campaign. The second and third models are less conclusive. While candidate quality and campaign intensity are both strongly associated with Senate campaign intensity, the second model predicts only 75 percent of the cases correctly. The fit of the third, pooled model is driven mostly by the ability to predict House campaign intensity. Furthermore, the appropriate standard of comparison is the level of accuracy reached by a naive model: always code Senate races hard fought and House races low key. This naive coding would correctly predict 90 percent of Krasno’s coding of House races and 45 percent of Krasno/Westlye Senate coding.

Campaign intensity undoubtedly summarizes a lot of information about political campaigns. Political scientists, media commentators, and politicians implicitly rely upon it when describing the strategic situation in campaigns and attempting to make sense of results. The implication is that House and Senate campaigns will look increasingly similar as the races become increasingly intense, even converging, perhaps, at some threshold level. I can illustrate some of these changes by comparing House and Senate spending rates for different

TABLE 4.7. Predicting Campaign Intensity

Sample	Maximum Likelihood Estimate
House only, 1988	
Spending ratio	-.803 (.124)
Challenger quality	.483 (.101)
<i>N</i> of cases	329
Percentage predicted	92.7
Senate only, 1982, 1984, 1988	
Spending ratio	-.297 (.007)
Challenger quality	.294 (.007)
<i>N</i> of cases	96
Percentage Predicted	75.0
All Data	
Spending ratio	-.751 (.107)
Challenger quality	.435 (.008)
Institution (dummy)	.726 (.393)
<i>N</i> of cases	425
Percentage predicted	91.7

Source: Intensity codes for the Senate in 1982, 1984, and 1988, Westlye 1991; intensity codes for the House and Senate, in 1988, Krasno 1994; spending taken from Federal Election Commission data; challenger quality is Canon's four-point scale.

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. The equations were estimated via maximum likelihood probit. The dependent variable in each case was campaign intensity (1 = hard fought, 0 = low key). The pooled equation includes House races from 1988 and Senate races from 1982, 1984, and 1988.

ratios of incumbent and challenger spending. In table 4.8, I display the average spending ratios for the House and Senate in 1982–96 over an increasingly “intense” subset of contests. More intense here is defined as a lower ratio of incumbent to challenger spending. For example, in row 1 the average spending ratio for all contested Senate races (“full range”) was 11.98, with a standard deviation of 35.84. Moving right, the average spending ratio decreases from 3.87 (for spending ratios in the range –25 to 25), 3.27, and so on. By the time I reach the final column, the ratio of incumbent and challenger spending is only about 15 percent higher in the Senate than in the House. Relative levels of spending by incumbents and challengers *do* converge as I select out an increasingly intense subset of contests.

Furthermore, note how the ratio declines as I remove more and more of the high-spending contests. When I eliminate only the least-competitive races (in col. 2 of table 4.8), House incumbents still spend more than five times as much as House challengers do, with a high standard deviation. The comparable rates for the Senate are 1.4 points lower, with a smaller standard deviation. As I move to more and more competitive races, the House incumbent spending advantage disappears. In the final two columns, in the most competitive subset of races, the Senate spending ratio is higher than the House ratio.²² This is to be expected; spending ratios in noncompetitive contests in this period were skewed because of high-spending Democratic incumbents. Note also that as the range is truncated the proportional reduction in races is greater in the House than in the Senate (proportions of races are in parentheses for each row). As I select out more competitive races, I lose 10 to 15 percent more of the House contests. This is a simple indication that on average Senate elections are more competitive. Still, I retain only 6 percent fewer House races in the most competitive category (43 vs. 37 percent).²³ Once we isolate the most competitive races, Senate and House campaign spending ratios are virtually identical. Institutional differences may be of little consequence in these races.

Campaign spending is a barely acceptable measure of campaign activity. An alternative measure—campaign intensity—tells a lot about House and Senate campaigns, but it is difficult to measure in a reliable fashion. Some alternatives are more easily accessible and are comparable across years and institutions (previous political experience, candidate quality, spending). Others draw upon a more inclusive set of considerations (intensity coding). While campaign intensity is clearly a central concept in the study of House and Senate elections, there is also much room for additional theoretical and measurement work in this area.

Conclusion

Senate and House *campaigns* are more distinct than Senate and House electoral *districts*. On average, Senate races are on average harder fought, with more money spent by higher quality challengers. However, as Westlye first noticed, many Senate races look like the typical House race and vice versa (1983). Westlye was able to show that challenger visibility in low-intensity Senate races fell to levels typically associated with the House. This same

22. In fact, spending ratios are more alike than is shown here. Once I select out hard-fought races, the party ratios of relative spending by Democrats and Republicans (including both open and incumbent seats) also converge.

23. These figures are certainly too high for the House. This shows once more that campaign spending alone is an error-prone measure of campaign activity and intensity.

TABLE 4.8. Spending Ratios in the Senate and House

	Full Range	$R < 25$	$R < 15$
Senate	11.98 (35.84)	3.87 (4.39)	3.27 (3.03)
Proportion of races	1.00	.92	.88
House	15.06 (24.06)	5.27 (6.13)	3.35 (3.26)
Proportion of races	1.00	.80	.70
		$R < 5$	$R < 2$
Senate		2.02 (1.00)	1.37 (.27)
Proportion of races		.72	.43
House		1.86 (1.08)	1.22 (.30)
Proportion of races		.55	.37

Source: Federal Election Commission data.

Note: Entries in each column are the mean spending ratios (R) for a given range. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

logic applies to the campaign environment. In low-intensity Senate races, I observe spending and candidate quality levels that I would typically associate with House races; in hard-fought House races, I observe high levels of both spending and candidate quality. Once again, concentrating on averages is a misleading way to look at things. It disguises interesting patterns within these institutions. While I care about the average level of competitiveness in the House and Senate, it is just as important to know how many House incumbents face stiff challenges and how many Senate incumbents can breeze to victory. At a minimum, this provides a more nuanced picture of electoral competitiveness in the U.S. Congress. More broadly, our attitudes toward reform of the campaign finance and election system, and opinions about the possibility that members, and institutions, respond to electoral pressures, will be affected not just by the typical candidate experience but by the experiences of all House and Senate candidates in both competitive and non-competitive races.

The first step in comparing the Senate and House is to generate comparable measures. Campaign spending must be adjusted on a per capita basis. Obviously, a candidate running in a state with 25 million people has to spend more than a candidate running in the typical House district of 500,000. Nonetheless, if we are interested in the probability that a citizen will be exposed to campaign information, then higher spending by the Senate candidate may actually

provide less information. A per capita adjustment is one way to allow comparisons across widely disparate electoral settings. Candidate quality measures, in contrast, have generally drawn on two pieces of information: previous elective experience and other notable political assets. Both are easily obtained for the House and the Senate.

The last part of the puzzle, campaign intensity, remains the most contentious to define and most difficult to operationalize. I have reviewed a series of competing measures of intensity, none of which is ideal. However, I am blessed with multiple realizations of campaign intensity. In subsequent chapters, I continue to utilize each of these scales.

Senate and House campaigns and candidates, like states and congressional districts, are not as different as a superficial analysis might lead us to believe. Candidates for the U.S. Senate spend, on average, 10 times as much as their House counterparts. But we know that states are larger than congressional districts. Once adjusted by population size, the distributions of Senate and House spending show considerable overlap. Spending in Senate campaigns anchors the high end and spending in House campaigns anchors the low end, yet there are many cases with the same levels. These are the cases I want to isolate for analysis.

Senate candidates also rank higher on measures of candidate quality. Previous experience and overall candidate quality are higher in Senate races. Again, I remain interested in those numerous cases in which the Senate challenger quality is well into the typical House range or in which the House candidate is actually quite experienced. If experience level *causes* competitive campaign situations, then this effect should be evident independent of institution.

In fact, once I isolate the most intense or competitive races, per capita spending rates and challenger quality levels begin to converge. This indicates that some Senate candidates look like House candidates and vice versa. Once the effects of campaign intensity, along with political setting variables such as media market efficiency, population diversity, and partisan division, are taken into account, we might find that candidate quality and campaign spending really do not differ across the House and Senate.

The next step is to determine why these differences persist. Is there is something inherently different in the House and Senate or do Senate *districts* happen to have certain features that, when they appear in House races, make House campaigns look like Senate campaigns? This requires a multivariate analysis of campaign spending, challenger quality, political settings, and institutions. I take up this task in the next chapter.