

5.9 Congressional Elections

Explain how the different processes work in U.S. Congressional elections.

Political legitimacy in our political process relies on free and fair elections. Certain institutions help to link the people to this process. These important linkage institutions are political parties, campaigns and elections. G.K. Chesterton was right, "Democracy is like blowing your nose – you may not do it very well, but you ought to do it yourself."

The sine quo non of any democracy are competitive elections. In our democracy national elections are held every two years. Every four years we hold a presidential election. In presidential election years there are also Congressional elections. Midterm elections are held two years into a president's term. These elections are reserved primarily for Congressional offices. State and local elections are held even more frequently. Before elections are held there are political campaigns. Campaigns serve the purpose of introducing candidates to the voters. They tend to be long, require large amounts of campaign finance and often are characterized by nasty and negative television ads. Without campaigns, however, we would not be able to accurately judge the character of our candidates.

Yet there is a pink elephant in the room on most election days, particularly when electing candidates to our Congress. It is the most important word associated with our electoral politics. That word is incumbency. An incumbent is the current office holder running for reelection. Incumbency is when the current office holder wins at a disproportionate rate. In other words, incumbency means once you win the likelihood is you get to stay in power for as long as you want.

Incumbency rates tend to increase as number of constituents decreases. Incumbency rates in the House of Representatives are higher than the Senate and much higher than when seeking reelection as president.

Incumbents have a number of advantages. They are: name recognition, ease of raising money, ability to campaign on a record of service, protection through favorably drawn district lines and relatively low turnout rates.

Some would say incumbency threatens the legitimacy of American democracy. Others say it merely reflects the kind of stability American voters desire. Like our constitution, incumbency would appear to reflect that American citizens find dramatic change worrisome.

Beyond incumbency our Congressional elections are impacted by gerrymandering, the party nomination process and campaign finance laws. Gerrymandered districts often make competition highly unlikely. The party nomination process often utilizes closed primaries that make it difficult to mount serious challenges. But perhaps most importantly campaign finance laws severely limit the ability of challengers to raise the kinds of money necessary to unseat long held incumbents. Unless a nationalized wave election takes place, our Congress stays fairly static despite its low approval ratings.

When congressional elections are nationalized, meaning focused attention on a major issue, turnout tends to be higher. So too is the rate of incumbent defeat. More often elections are localized focusing on local issues. When this is so incumbent rates are quite high. Incumbency is the likelihood of winning reelection. Incumbency rates in the House of Representatives often reach 90%

though a little lower in the Senate. We may hold our Congress in disregard but most tend to be reelected anyway. More than anything else this is due to turnout in the primaries. Remember most of us stay home for this phase. The party base dominates primary election turnout.

Voter turnout in elections remains low. In presidential years one hopes to exceed 50% of eligible voters in the general election. Turnout in the primaries is much lower. Voter turnout in midterm elections rarely exceeds 40%. Today's elections have too many under votes and over votes. Under votes are those who choose not to vote. Over votes are those who have spoiled their ballots by improperly marking them.

The process and outcomes in U.S. Congressional elections are impacted by a variety of factors. Federal policies on campaigning and electoral rules continue to impact our democratic process. E.E. Schattschneider wrote:

Democracy is a competitive political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives of public policy in such a way that the public can participate in the decision-making process . . . Conflict, competition, organization and leadership are the ingredients of a working definition of democracy.

As citizens we must remain vigilant in protecting our democratic heritage. Do we see competition in our elections? Are we free to organize as we wish? Have we forged the necessary leadership to steer our ship of state through difficult seas? It is always easy to criticize but, in the end, these democratic essentials are up to us to maintain.

