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You Really *Can't* Beat Somebody with Nobody: Declining Competition in the American Political System*

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Observers of the American political system – as they may with any other regime – view its level and nature of political competition as an indicator of its general health. Higher levels of competition characterize a system in which political elites and the populace are engaged in exchange and discussion of the vital issues of the day and one in which many elites are willing to stake out and defend positions on those issues by campaigning for public office. Further, this heightened systemic competition may encourage higher rates of voter turnout by eliciting the interest of the electorate.

Recent electoral cycles in the American political system appear to paint the portrait of a very competitive democratic regime. If one gauges the health of the American system by the “closeness” of its elections, one finds a very healthy regime. The presidential election of 2000 – the closest in American history and only the fourth time in the history of the republic in which an Electoral College “inversion” decided the victor, the 50-50 split of the United States Senate in that same year, the gain of only two Senate seats by the Republican Party in the subsequent 2002 midterm election, victories by the Democratic Party in two recent special elections for the United States House of Representatives, a tightening of the partisan control of governorships, and a persisting small gap between the two-party nationwide vote all stand as evidence in support of the

thesis that democratic competition is alive and well in the United States.

All of these, however, are the national, collective results of electoral processes in the districts and states forming the American geopolitical map. The presidential election’s Electoral College result is the sum of 51 separate elections for president. The partisan makeup of the legislative branch is the collective result of 435 House elections and 33 (or 34 depending on which class is up for selection) individual Senate elections every two years. Thus, those who only examine the “forest” of political endgame results may miss what is going on at the level of the individual “trees” which shape the collective result.

When one examines competition at this “micro” level, one finds it in decline even as it appears to be on the rise at the macro level. Viewing competition from the perspective of contested seats presents a different picture of the health of the political system. Further, this decline in competition manifests itself in a peculiar manner given the makeup of the democratic institutions of American government and may evidence fundamental changes under way in the American political system. It is this puzzle of competition, how it has recently manifested itself in American politics, and the implications of declining competition I intend to explore in this essay by examining the over-time variation of

uncontested seats in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Competition Over Time in the House of Representatives

There are different ways by which to conceive of “competition.” In the literature, some distinguish between “marginal” and “nonmarginal” incumbents.¹ Some use a continuous measure of two-party vote or some variant.

For this essay, I follow the lead of a previous piece (Wrighton and Squire 1997) and denote the level of competition in any given House election year by the number of uncontested seats, defined as those races in which there is only one major-party candidate. Having a competitor on the ballot is a basic component of democracy. While “you can’t beat somebody with nobody” is a popular political axiom, it is not trivial to note that you can’t beat anybody with nothing.

Consequently, parties have worked hard over the years to fill their slots on the ballot (e.g., Key 1964, 446-447; Herrnson 1988, 48-56). Thus, fewer uncontested seats indicate a relatively competitive year in House elections. More uncontested House seats indicate a less competitive year.

Using this measure of competition, how competitive have House elections been over time? Figure 1 displays the pattern of the incidence of uncontested seats over the period 1912 to 2002. (1912 serves as the starting point because that was the first election where the number of seats in the House was fixed at 435.)² A glance reveals two interesting

¹ This demarcation is somewhat arbitrary. The “usual” standard is that obtaining 56 percent or less of the vote in the previous election denotes a “marginal” representative. Jacobson (1987) makes a strong case against this “standard” by asserting that even though most incumbents now win with higher vote shares they may still consider themselves “marginal.”

² It also is the case that very few races since 1910 involve serious third-party candidates in the place of one of the

patterns. First, a saw tooth pattern appears with some regularity over the 46 cycles. There are alternating peaks (less competition) and valleys (more competition). Second, in recent decades competition has increased (with a notable decline). Starting in the 1950s, the number of uncontested House seats decreases, with a notable increase in the 1980s. In House elections of the 1990s, the level of competition soared relative to that of the entire period. Indeed, in the cycles encompassing the change in partisan control of the House, the series hits several lows in the number of uncontested seats with 30 in 1992, 46 in 1994, and an all-series nadir of 18 in 1996. As the Republican majority has become entrenched the numbers of uncontested seats have risen to the levels of the 1980s.

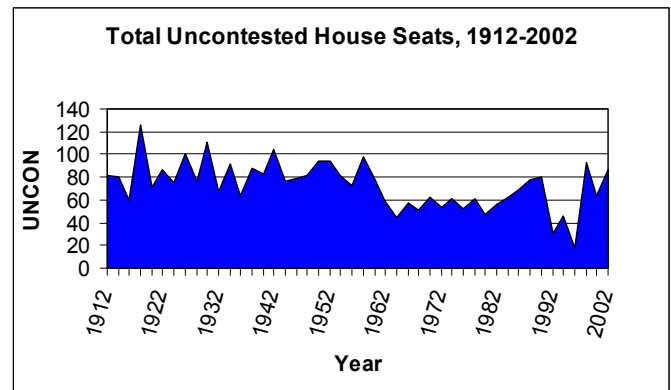


Figure 2 presents a graphical look at the difference between Republican and Democratic uncontested House seats. First, the two-election cycle appears to hold for both Democrats and Republicans; in one election competition is up, and in the next it is down. Second, the parties diverge in the level of competition in recent elections. From the mid-1960s through the 1980s the number of uncontested seats enjoyed by the Democrats was roughly constant. Since 1990, however, the Democrats have experienced a dramatic drop in the number of “free rides.” In contrast, over that same time period, the number of

two major parties (a notable current exception is Bernie Sanders of VT). Elections before 1912 had a greater incidence of such situations.

Republican uncontested seats has generally increased.

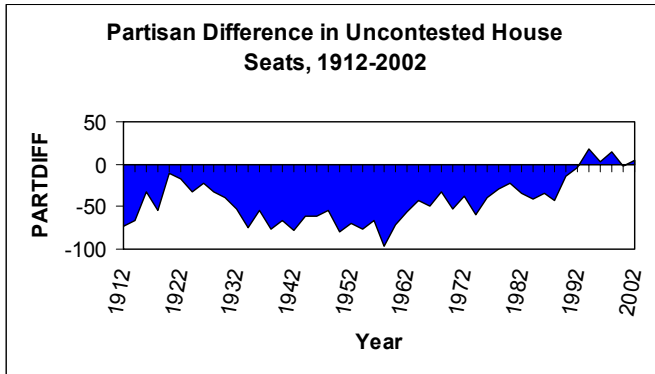


Figure 2 also reveals the great advantages held by Democrats for most of the series. Most notable is the steep increase in the difference between Republican and Democratic uncontested seats following 1932. One might attribute this to the realignment of 1932; apparently, Republicans got fewer free rides as the result of losing the partisan base it had for almost 80 years. In the 1960s, the difference between the parties' uncontested seats begins a 40-year trip to 0. One may attribute much of this move to a recent (and dramatic) increase in the numbers of southern uncontested Republican House seats.³ This increase appears in the mid-1960s, possibly in conjunction with the Goldwater run for the presidency (Black and Black 1987; Canon 1992; Converse, Clausen and Miller 1965), and in each cycle of the 1990s – with the exception of 1996 – Republicans benefited from at least 20 uncontested House seats in the South.

Although “eyeballing” a time series can suggest some possible relationships, more rigorous and systematic analysis is, of course, required. Examination of the time series presented here suggests some possible explanations; but other, less obvious explanations can be offered as well.

³ The South is defined here as the states of the Confederacy: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

Influences on Competition in House Elections Over Time

Wrighton and Squire (1997) test several sets of variables with the potential to affect the over-time variation in competition for the United States House of Representatives. They do so from the well-grounded assumption that candidates for office act strategically when deciding to compete for a seat. That is, they assess in simple terms whether or not running for and holding office is worth the effort and the associated opportunity costs. A number of studies have revealed the calculated behavior of possible candidates (e.g., Canon 1993; Fowler and McClure 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1981; Kazee 1994).⁴ In general, candidates are more likely to run as they see their chances for victory increase. Similarly, where prospects for victory are dim, potential candidates are less inclined to run, enhancing the likelihood of uncontested races (Squire 1989). Thus, one should expect that the number of uncontested seats should fluctuate with the competitiveness of the electoral environment.

They go on to classify potential explanations of over-time variation in electoral competition for the U.S. House of Representatives into three general categories. The first is partisan change. In this category, they include phenomena such as the partisan shift in the previous election's vote, the realignment of 1932, the rise of the Republican South, and midterm elections. Their second set of potential explanations is change in electoral rules. In particular, they emphasize the importance of redistricting of seats within states as an important change in the rules affecting competition (The effect on competition which drawing the lines in favorable ways for incumbents has should be quite apparent in the example of California elsewhere in this edition). A final category is

⁴ See also the discussion of candidacy decisions in Fowler (1993) and Squire (1995, 898-99).

secular change in the electoral system: the well-documented increase in the incumbency advantage starting in the mid-1960s. All of these factors affect individual candidacy decisions and help create variation in the amount of competition in the system and – by extension – its health.

Wrighton and Squire (1997) find that many of these factors contribute to the over-time variation in competition for the U.S. House of Representatives. In particular, they find that the partisan change variables – the realignment of 1932 and the rise of the Republican South – significantly contribute to the shifts in variation in the numbers of total uncontested House seats, Democratic uncontested ones, those of the Republican Party, and the difference between the parties' uncontested seats. In the analysis – which spanned the period 1912 to 1994 – they found significant gains in uncontested seats for the Democrats as a result of the 1932 realignment (evidenced by a significant shift in the slope) with gains in the incidence of running without Republican opposition continuing in the period following the Roosevelt sweep (manifested by an increase by which the slope coefficient changes following 1932). Further, there is a downward shift in uncontested seats as result of the 1964 GOP gains in the South. Their model of the difference between the numbers of Democratic and Republican uncontested seats shows many of the same trends.

Recent Trends and Implications for the Health of the Political System

At the outset of this essay I asserted that – while many observers of the American political system may view its recent collective results as evidence of a competitive and healthy one – an examination of the trends in competition from the perspective of a set of individual candidacy decisions may tell a different story. Indeed, when one examines

the recent data on uncontested House elections – including a preliminary count of 85 uncontested House seats for 2004⁵ – in light of the increasing passion with which political discourse and activity are conducted, one finds the potential for several different trends, some of which may be deemed negative for the health of the political system.

At the core of the decline in competition for the U.S. House of Representatives is redistricting. Many have long recognized the process of redrawing the lines as affecting the political fortunes of House incumbents, particularly in states losing seats as a result of the decennial reapportionment among the states. Recently, however, the process has become acutely politicized as Republican legislative majorities have increasingly come to control the process. The recent redistricting processes in Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Texas – where Democratic members of the legislature spent time in Oklahoma and New Mexico in order to prevent the presence of a quorum and delay the process – evidence the creativity that GOP legislatures have developed in this process. Increasingly, however, it appears that the parties are making implicit bargains in the states to protect their incumbents and minimize the overall size of the battlefield.

While Wrighton and Squire (1997) found no systematic evidence for the impact of redistricting on the variation in the over-time competition for the House, an examination of the data provides some evidence for a developing trend in its impact. The average number of uncontested House seats for the four redistricting cycles prior to 2002 was 50, or about 11% of the total number of House seats. In 2002, the number reached 87, or 20% of all

⁵ From data derived from the *Los Angeles Times* Election 2004 website accessible at www.latimes.com. The figure cited for 2004 is preliminary as some states' filing deadlines have yet to pass at the time of publication of this piece, and some seats may yet be contested.

House seats. In 2004, 85 House seats are currently without major-party competition, and political prognosticators note very few truly “competitive” seats. Although more cycles of data may provide a more definitive picture, the acute politicization of the redistricting process may be taking the political system to a plateau where a large portion of seats go regularly uncontested.

Will such declining competition in the U.S. House of Representatives (and, by extension, the overall political system) make a difference in the health of the political system? In at least three ways such a decline in competition has the potential to make a difference. Through a curious role reversal between the House and the Senate, an “unhinging” of congressional elections from presidential ones, and a decline in the amount of discourse about important issues facing the polity, a decline in competition has the potential to affect the system’s health.

First, it is curious that one would find declining competition in the United States House of Representatives. The framers set it up to reflect the passions of the electorate. Its counterpart, the Senate, was set up as a place to cool those passions. Given the built-in responsiveness, one might expect the House to remain a competitive institution, yet redistricting decisions are curtailing that competition. This has the potential to reduce the House’s responsiveness to the electorate in marked contrast to the framers’ intent.

Second, there appears to be an “unhinging” of House elections from presidential ones. Indeed, as far as deciding to run for the House, Tip O’Neill’s axiom that “all politics is local” still rings true. One sees, however, that redistricting may be making this increasingly more local, leading to more noncompetitive House districts in states fiercely competitive on the presidential level as well as competitive ones in states ignored by

the presidential candidates.⁶ In 2004, there are few competitive states – such as New Hampshire – in which presidential candidates can benefit from being “pushed” from below. If this trend continues, presidential coattails might be a thing of the past insofar as they can affect the outcomes (or candidacy decisions) in House districts.

Finally, an uncontested race has implications far beyond being unable to beat somebody with nobody. An uncontested House race is one in which the voters have little opportunity to hear candidates engage in vigorous discussion of the major issues of the day. Even co-partisans of the one major-party candidate in an uncontested race may wish a dialogue on certain issues. Increasingly, however, the acute politicization of the process has dampened such discussions. The major parties, through their agreements on redistricting, may have sacrificed political discourse for political expediency and enhanced electoral certainty.

This essay has illuminated how changes to electoral processes have potentially profound effects on political outcomes as well as for the overall health of the American political system. While it may be politically expedient to create more “safe” seats (trees), those who tinker with the lines should remain mindful of the systemic (forest) consequences of their actions. Thus, the micro and the macro levels interact and both observers and practitioners should consider the effects each has on the other before declaring the system healthy because of close overall electoral outcomes.

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⁶ In 2004, Florida, a battleground state in the presidential election, has 11 uncontested House seats.

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* With apologies to Gary Jacobson who first used a variant of this phrase in his 1990 book *The Electoral Origins of Divided Government: Competition in U.S. House Elections, 1946-1988*.