

Jamie L. Carson and Jason M. Roberts. *Ambition, Competition, and Electoral Reform: The Politics of Congressional Elections Over Time.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013. 192 pp. (\$60 cloth).

In the field of American politics, the study of congressional elections stands as one of the – if not *the* – most-studied areas. For the past 40 years, empiricists have explored almost every conceivable aspect of the manner in which Members of Congress attain – and retain – office. By building a bridge to the past, this work by Carson and Roberts opens up even more fertile ground for study in this area. They do so by employing theoretical frameworks familiar to students of congressional elections and by demonstrating how political parties and candidates have adapted to and, in some cases, embraced strategically changes in electoral processes over time. The result is a more-nuanced treatment of the underlying processes at work during the Progressive reform period and a link between two eras in congressional elections deemed by many as distinct from each other.

The authors begin by examining the literature of congressional elections prior to World War II and by asserting that an empirical, district-level examination would likely bring nuances to the fore. They assert that the literature relies primarily on anecdotal evidence and that many of their conclusions rely on national and partisan tides and backlash effects to explain the variation in the fortunes of congressional candidates during this earlier period. From this literature one gleans the visage – depicted well in the film *Gangs of New York* – of strong parties dominating candidate recruitment and voting processes. The authors suggest that the application of a detailed theoretical framework that draws from those outlined in the existing literature on congressional elections can inform an empirical analysis that will reveal more-nuanced forces at work in elections prior to the modern era.

Carson and Roberts build the supports for a bridge to the past on the basis of the strategic politician framework. Some students of congressional elections might be surprised to see the application of an “old” theory to a “new” subset of elections, but the authors’ previous work in the pre-WWII era suggests that the strategic politician framework may actually be applicable to elections prior to those on which the framework is based. To span those supports and complete the theoretical bridge, they employ the concept of candidate quality. They do so by examining the competitiveness of pre-WWII congressional elections and finding that, during this time, party machines provided inducements for quality candidates to run despite long odds of winning. A guarantee of a soft landing should a quality candidate lose – or “insurance” – gave risk-adverse, strategic politicians incentive to run when otherwise they might not have. Thus, party machines recognized the strategic nature of quality candidates and induced a level of competition that without such guarantees today’s candidate-centered campaigns do not possess.

Carson and Roberts also examine the trends of Progressive era reforms and their effects on political parties and elucidate more nuanced effects than those one usually hears about in treatments of the time period. In particular, the authors examine the introduction of the Australian ballot and the direct primary. (Indeed, readers will likely learn something new about the party-controlled balloting process prior to reform: sight was not the only sense that party machines relied upon to help voters identify their respective ballots!) The authors detail the spread of each across the nation and the effects on the parties’ tactics. Again, strategy played a

key role as parties championed ballot and primary formats that would allow them to maintain a measure of advantage in a reformed process.

The authors engage in a series of empirical tests designed to investigate the over-time effects of reform on quality challenger emergence and the effects of congressional elections in the pre-WWII era. Carson and Roberts also examine effects related to ballot and nomination reforms. The results provide solid support for employing candidate quality as a component of the bridge to past congressional elections that the authors construct in this work. They also demonstrate how – with the option of the party-column ballot and closed primary – parties were able to weather the potential deleterious effects of the Progressive era reforms. Thus, this work adds to the literature by drawing more-nuanced conclusions about electoral reforms.

In leading into their final set of empirical tests, Carson and Roberts correctly suggest that “few issues in American politics have received as much attention and scrutiny as the existence of, and the basis for, the incumbency advantage” (p. 117). Of course, one might easily argue that incumbency is the *sine qua non* of the study of post-WWII congressional elections. The authors bring their expanded dataset to bear on the study of incumbency and demonstrate well how changes in electoral processes – particularly ballot reform – and candidate quality have affected the fortunes of incumbents across time.

This work provides several important conclusions for students of congressional elections. First, much of what we have learned about them is – upon closer inspection with pre-WWII data – not necessarily unique to the modern era. Second, the rules of the game of politics have continuously mattered in shaping electoral outcomes and the strategic behavior of politicians. Third, well-intentioned reforms can, and often do, lead to unintended and negative consequences. Finally, while “you can’t beat somebody with nobody” stands as an ironclad law of electoral politics, this work demonstrates that the quality of congressional candidates has also mattered in shaping electoral outcomes beyond the timeframe in which most of the current literature on congressional elections resides.

By employing the theoretical frameworks of contemporary work Carson and Roberts have built a sturdy bridge to past congressional elections. Their work here will likely inspire an extension even further back and stand as an important point of departure for the future study of congressional elections.

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