CHAPTER

2

Candidates and Nominations

Can I win? Is this the right time for me to run? Who is my competition likely to be? These are some of the questions that go through the minds of prospective candidates for Congress and other offices. During the golden age of political parties, party bosses dominated the candidate recruitment process. In many places the bosses' control over the party apparatus was so complete that, when in agreement, they could guarantee the nomination to the person they wanted to run. Moreover, receiving the nomination usually was tantamount to winning the election, because boss-controlled political machines usually were located in one-party areas.[1]

After the golden age, party leaders had less control over the nomination process and less ability to ensure that the individuals they recruited would, in fact, win the nomination or the general election. Party leaders today no longer handpick congressional candidates. They encourage some individuals to run for office and discourage others. In a few cases, they may even provide a candidate with financial support, but there is no guarantee that their preferred contender will win. Contemporary parties are vehicles that self-recruited candidates use to advance their careers rather than gatekeepers that can make or break those careers. Party recruitment has been largely replaced by a process referred to as *candidate emergence*.[2]

In this chapter we examine who decides to run for Congress, how potential candidates reach their decisions, and the influence of different individuals and groups on these decisions. We also examine the impact of candidate emergence and political experience on an individual's prospects of winning the nomination and the general election, as well as the implications of these contests on the representativeness of the national legislature.

Strategic Ambition

The Constitution, state laws, and the political parties pose few formal barriers to running for Congress. Members of the House are required to be at least 25 years of age, to have been U.S. citizens for at least seven years, and to reside in the state they represent. The requirements for the Senate are only slightly more stringent. In addition to having a state residence, senators must be at least 30 years old and have been U.S. citizens for nine or more years. Some states bar prison inmates, convicted felons, or individuals who have been declared insane from running for office. Most require candidates to pay a small filing fee or to collect anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand signatures before having their names placed on the ballot. As is typical for election to public offices in many democracies, a dearth of formal requirements allows almost anyone to run for Congress. More than 1,600 people typically declare themselves candidates in most election years.

As a result of the lack of a tightly controlled party recruitment process, most congressional candidates are self-starters and their professional and personal characteristics are critical to their success. Strategic ambition—the combination of a desire to get elected, a realistic understanding of what it takes to win, and an ability to gauge the available opportunities in a given political context—is one such characteristic that distinguishes most competitive candidates for Congress from the general public. The desire, skills, and resources that *strategic* candidates—sometimes referred to as *ambitious*, *rational*, or *quality* candidates—bring to the electoral arena are the most important criteria separating them from those who have little chance of getting elected. Strategic candidates are political entrepreneurs who make rational calculations about when to run. Rather than plunging in, they assess the context in which they would have to wage a campaign, consider the effects a bid for office could have on their professional career and family, and carefully weigh their prospects for success.[3]

Strategic politicians examine many institutional, structural, and subjective factors when considering a bid for Congress.[4] Institutional factors include filing deadlines, campaign finance laws, nomination processes that allow or prohibit preprimary endorsements, and other election statutes and party rules. Structural factors include the social, economic, and partisan composition of the electoral district; the district's geographic compactness; the media markets that serve the district; the degree of overlap between the district and lower-level electoral constituencies; and the possibilities for election to some alternative office. One structural factor that greatly affects the calculations of strategic politicians is whether an incumbent plans to run for reelection.

Potential candidates also assess the political climate when deciding whether to run. Strategic politicians focus mainly on local circumstances, particularly whether a seat will be vacant or whether a scandal or the results of the previous election suggest that an incumbent is vulnerable.[5] National forces, such as a public mood that favors Democrats versus Republicans or challengers versus incumbents, are usually of secondary importance.

The convergence of local and national factors can have a strong impact on the decisions of possible contenders. The widespread hostility the public has directed at Congress, its members, and government overall in recent years appears to have motivated many would-be representatives and senators to run for a seat in Congress. Impressive numbers ran in 1992 and 1994 and between 2008 and 2012; 2018 witnessed a major increase in the candidacies of nonincumbents.

Incumbents

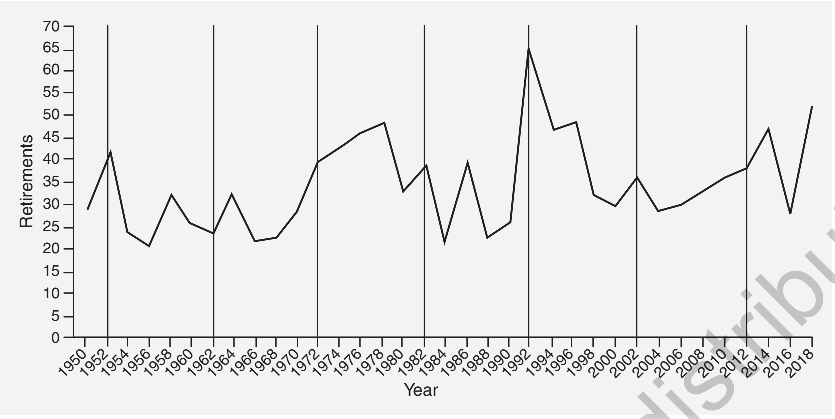
For House incumbents the decision to run for reelection is usually easy. Congress offers its members many reasons to stay, including the ability to affect issues they care about, a challenging work environment, political power, and public recognition. It is also an ideal platform for pursuing a governorship, a cabinet post, or even a seat in the Oval Office. Name recognition and the advantages inherent in incumbency—such as paid staff and the franking privilege (which have an estimated worth between $2 million and $3 million per member per term)—are two factors that discourage strong opposition.[6] Furthermore, House members recognize that the "home styles" they use to present themselves to constituents create bonds of trust that have electoral implications.[7]

Incumbents undertake a number of additional preelection activities to generate support, ward off opposition, and build the foundation for a bid for higher office. Most raise large war chests early in the election cycle to intimidate likely opponents.[8] Many keep a skeletal campaign organization intact between elections and use it to raise money and communicate with supporters. Some even shower their constituents with greeting cards, flowers, and other gifts.[9] Their activities in office and preelection efforts, as well as the fact that they have been elected to Congress at least once before, make it certain that most incumbents will be reelected.

In some circumstances, however, an incumbent realizes that it may be more difficult than usual to hold on to his or her seat. Redistricting, for example, can turn a safe district into a marginal one, or even force two incumbents to compete against each other.[10] Elections that immediately follow redistricting are often preceded by a jump in the number of legislators who choose to leave the House for private life or in pursuit of another office (see Figure 2-1).

Other factors also can weaken an incumbent's reelection prospects. A highly publicized ethical transgression, a weak economy, a wave of antigovernment hostility, or an unpopular president or presidential candidate of the incumbent's party can make reelection more difficult, particularly for members of Congress who occupy swing seats. All can influence the quality of the opposition an incumbent is likely to face, the level of campaign

Figure 2-1 Number of Retirements by House Incumbents, 1950–2018



Sources: Compiled from various issues of *CQ Weekly* and *Congressional Roll Call* (Washington, DC: CQ Press), and Norman J. Ornstein, Thomas E. Mann, and Michael J. Malbin, *Vital Statistics on Congress, 2001–2002* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2002), 71.

effort needed to remain competitive, the toll the campaign is likely to take on the incumbent's family, and the incumbent's desire to stay in Congress. When the demands of campaigning and diminished odds of victory appear to outweigh the benefits to be derived from reelection, strategic incumbents often leave office.

Elections held during periods of voter frustration, congressional scandal, or incivility within Congress itself also are preceded by numerous retirements.[11] A combination of these factors led 15 percent of all House members to retire in 1992—a post–World War II record. The hard-fought elections that took place in 1994 inspired many to leave Congress in 1996. During the election cycles that followed, fewer opted not to run for reelection. Mindful of the slim margin of control in their chambers, House and Senate leaders discouraged party members from leaving in order to minimize the open seats the party would have to defend.

Elections that occur following upheaval within Congress itself also are marked by many congressional retirements. The political reforms passed during the mid-1970s, which redistributed power from conservative senior House members to more liberal junior members, encouraged many of the senior members to end their congressional careers.[12] The Republican takeover of the House in 1994 encouraged many Democrats, and some Republicans, to retire. The Democrats' claiming a majority of seats in the House in 2007 and increasing it in 2009 led substantially more Republicans than Democrats to exit the lower chamber prior to the 2008 and 2010 elections. Similar numbers from each party left the chamber before the next two elections. For some members of Congress, retirement from politics or the pursuit of some higher office is a positive alternative to waging a reelection campaign that, if successful, could result in their continuing to suffer the powerlessness associated with being in the minority. For others, particularly those unpopular with their colleagues, leaving Congress may be preferable to the indignity of being passed over for a committee chairmanship or some other leadership post.

The individuals most likely to give up a seat in Congress are senior members who decide they would rather enjoy the fruits of old age than gear up for a tough reelection campaign, members with ambitions for higher office, officeholders implicated in a scandal, and those who have lost influence, anticipate losing it, or are tiring of having little in the first place.[13] The 2018 midterms were preceded by an unusually large number of retirements, particularly among House Republicans. Those not seeking reelection did so for the usual reasons: 18 of the 52 House members and 2 of the 3 senators who retired from politics were 65 years or older; 20 House members pursued a Senate seat, governorship, or some other statewide office; more than half a dozen retired or resigned after being implicated in scandal. Among those retiring in anticipation of losing power was Representative Bill Shuster (R-PA). The then 57-year-old chairman of the House Transportation Committee recognized he would have to relinquish this position at the close of the 115th Congress because of House Republican rules limiting committee chairs to three terms, not to mention the prospect of facing a difficult reelection campaign.[14]

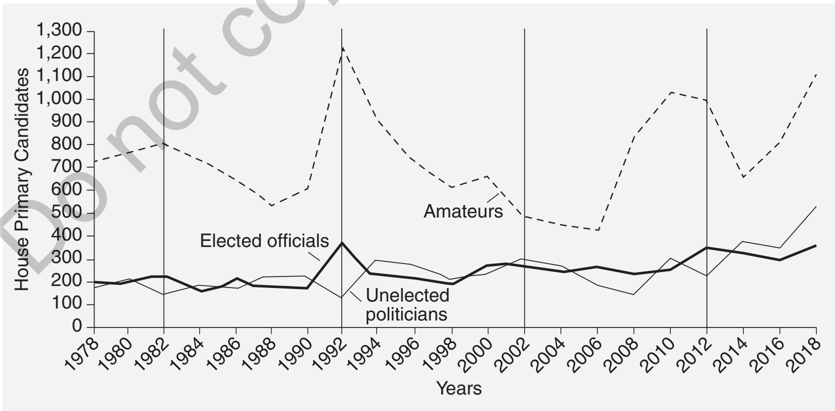
At least some legislators give thought to influencing future politics in their districts as they consider retirement. Former representative Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ), who was grievously wounded in a shooting, was significantly involved in the selection of Ron Barber, her district director (also wounded in the shooting), as her successor and played a high-profile role in his near-successful 2014 bid for reelection. Representative John Dingell (D-MI), who for 59 years held a seat previously occupied by his father, was instrumental in enabling his wife, Deborah Dingell, to win the seat upon his retirement. The Dingells are not the only members of Congress to have helped pave the way for a family member to succeed them. Legacy politics are not that unusual in the United States. The Kennedys and Bushes are probably the most visible political dynasties in American politics, but there are others.[15]

Nonincumbents

Usually, more individuals with previous experience in elective office run for the House in election cycles that follow redistricting than in other years (see Figure 2-2).[16] These *elected officials* anticipate the opportunities that arise from the creation of new districts, the redrawing of old districts, or the retirements that often accompany elections after redistricting. Referred to as "pulling effects," these changes at the congressional level are sometimes accompanied by the "pushing effects" of the redistricting of state legislatures, county councils, and other offices, which can diminish the reelection prospects of individuals holding these offices. Term limits for state legislators, on the books in 15 states in 2018, also can have a pushing effect.[17] The combined effects of redistricting, term limits, and other aspects of the political environment encouraged almost 300 major-party candidates who had experience holding elective office to run in 2002. A favorable reading of the political context encouraged at least 250 elected officials to throw their hats into the ring in each of the next six election cycles.

In 2018, many savvy politicians with officeholding experience, including large numbers of Democratic women, also pondered a run for the national legislature. Some were encouraged by the prevalence of congressional retirements. Many others reacted to voter anger over the outrageous statements of President Donald Trump, his defeat of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the Electoral College (but not the popular vote), his intemperate behavior as president, and the policies

Figure 2-2 Number of House Primary Candidates by Political Experience, 1978–2018



Sources: Compiled from candidates' websites and other public sources.

Note: Includes nonincumbent candidates for major-party nominations only.

initiated by his administration and the GOP-controlled Congress. These politicians no doubt believed they could tap into the determination for change voiced by traditional Democratic activists and donors, as well as the pent-up energy unleashed by the #MeToo movement. Ultimately, more than 360 of them joined the race for Congress.[18]

Individuals who have significant campaign and political experience but who have never held elective office also respond to the opportunities that emerge in specific election years. These *unelected politicians* comprise legislative and executive branch aides, political appointees, state and local party officials, political consultants, and individuals who previously ran for Congress. Most of these individuals think strategically. Before deciding to run, they monitor voter sentiment, assess the willingness of political activists and contributors to support their campaign, and keep close tabs on who is likely to oppose them for the nomination or in the general election.

Unelected politicians differ somewhat from elected officials in their perceptions of what constitutes a good time to run. The decisions of potential primary opponents who have officeholding experience weigh more heavily in their calculations. Unelected politicians appreciate both the long odds of beating an incumbent, especially a member of their party, and the difficulty of defeating someone else who has the name recognition, fundraising abilities, and other advantages that come from having been previously elected. Relatively few unelected politicians view postredistricting elections as promising because districts are almost always redrawn to favor the incumbent, and elected officials usually run for a seat when they are not. Congressional candidates with previous officeholding experience also discourage unelected politicians from entering a race in the event of a congressional retirement. However, if a House member retires, a candidate with officeholding experience does not come forward, and the political environment seems favorable, an unelected politician usually fills the void. This occurs both in elections that immediately follow redistricting and in some nonredistricting years, such as 2014. Like their counterparts with officeholding experience, many unelected politicians were emboldened to run for the House in 2018 based on their reading of the political environment. Some believed the nation's anti-Washington mood held unusual potential for candidates who had the political skills and contacts to run a strong campaign and could also claim to be Washington outsiders. As a result, a record 525 unelected politicians ran for the House that year.

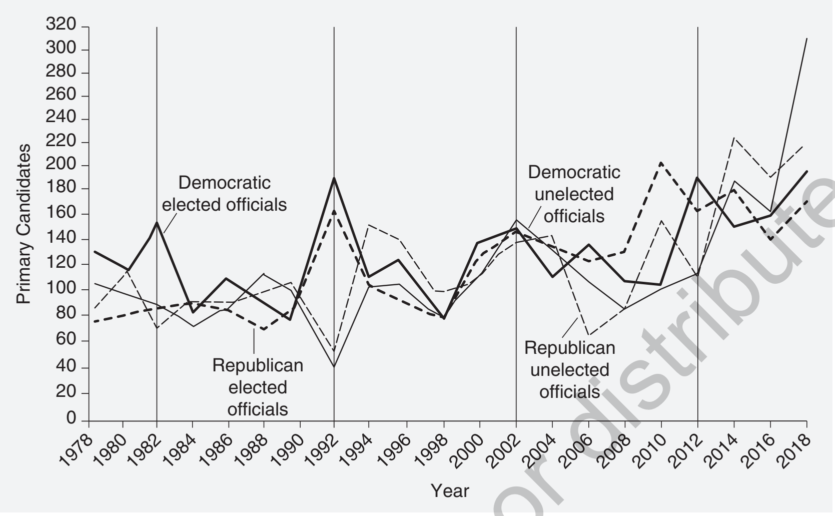
Political amateurs are a very diverse group, and it is difficult to generalize about their political decision-making. Only a small subgroup of amateurs, referred to as *ambitious amateurs*, behave strategically, responding to the same opportunities and incentives that influence the decisions of experienced politicians. *Policy amateurs*, comprising another subgroup, are driven by issues, whereas *experience-seeking amateurs* (sometimes referred to as *hopeless amateurs*) run because of a sense of civic duty or for the thrill of running itself.[19]

The many amateurs who ran in 1992 set a modern record, one not even approached until 2010. The 1992 and 1994 elections occurred in political landscapes that were ideal for running issue-oriented or anti-Washington campaigns. Calls for change and relentless government-bashing in the media provided reform-minded amateurs from both parties, but especially Republicans, with ready-made platforms. Those leaning toward the GOP ran in large numbers in both cycles, in part as a response to the Democrats' longtime dominance of Congress. The political setting in 2010 was alluring to GOP amateurs of all types. Voter unhappiness with the economy and displeasure with the Democrats, who controlled the White House and both chambers of Congress, provided motivation and made it easy to lay blame. Some undoubtedly responded to the groundswell of energy emanating from the Tea Party movement. The boom in amateur candidacies that occurred in 2018 was in many ways the mirror image of the surge of 2010. Republican control of the federal government, a highly unpopular president, and GOP initiatives on health care, immigration, taxes, and other salient issues inspired the candidacies of many Democrats with officeholding or other significant political experience and propelled even larger numbers of amateurs to run for a seat in Congress. The amateurs may not have been as calculating as the others in their decision-making, but many were as strongly motivated.

Presidential popularity, international conflict, economics, the performance of the federal government, and the outcomes of congressional elections often influence the candidacies of strategic politicians. Moreover, what appears to be a year of opportunity to strategic politicians of one party is often, but not always, viewed as a bad year for those in the other party. The political environment also has different effects on candidates who possess different levels of political experience. In 1992, redistricting, a weak economy, scandal, and voter antipathy toward Congress led many elected officials from both parties to run for the House, which in turn discouraged many unelected politicians (see Figure 2-3). The Republican takeover of Congress in 1995 had the opposite effect. Many GOP politicians with officeholding or significant unelected experience declined to run in 1996 and 1998 because they believed their party had captured virtually every vulnerable Democrat-held seat. Demoralized by their party's low standing in the polls and President Bill Clinton's unpopularity, many Democratic elected officials also opted not to run, even against some vulnerable GOP incumbents.

Responding to George W. Bush's high approval ratings and widespread support for the Iraq War and the war on terrorism, more Republican than

Figure 2-3 House Primary Candidacies of Politicians by Party and Experience, 1978–2018



Sources: Compiled from various issues of *CQ Weekly*, candidates' websites, and other public sources.

Note: Includes candidates for major-party nominations only.

Democratic elected officials and unelected politicians ran for the House. This pattern reversed in 2006 as the president's standing in the polls declined, support for the conflict in the Middle East waned, political scandals dominated the headlines, and the Republican-controlled federal government was heavily criticized for its poor response to Hurricane Katrina. The Democrats' reclaiming control of the House in 2007 provided Republicans with more, and Democrats with fewer, opportunities to unseat a first-term legislator. It led to a growth in the number of GOP candidates with political experience in 2008 and a corresponding decline among experienced Democrats. The pattern repeated itself two years later. The GOP's pickup of 63 seats in 2010 led fewer experienced Republicans to run for the House in 2012 and had the opposite effect on similarly qualified Democrats.

The election of President Trump in 2016, deep divisions among the public over his and GOP lawmakers' policy proposals, and the retirement of 34 GOP House members had a major impact on the decision-making of experienced potential candidates from both parties. However, it had its greatest effect on Democrats, especially unelected politicians. Undeterred by the long odds of defeating an incumbent, more than 300 of these individuals, including large numbers of women, ran for the House.

Typically, the best-qualified office seekers wait until a seat opens through either the retirement or the death of the incumbent before throwing their hats into the ring.[20] Once a seat becomes vacant, it acts like a magnet, drawing the attention of many individuals. Usually several strategic politicians will express interest in an open seat. Open-seat races, defined as contests in which there is no incumbent at the beginning of the election season, accounted for roughly 12 percent of House elections in 2018.[21] Almost half of the Democratic nonincumbents who had officeholding experience ran in one of these contests, as did nearly 60 percent of their Republican counterparts (see Table 2-1). Fewer unelected politicians and political amateurs did likewise. Many undoubtedly were dissuaded by the candidacies of the elected officials.

Incumbency usually discourages competition in primary elections, especially within the incumbent's party. In 2018 only 10 percent of the Democratic elected officials who ran for the House were willing to challenge one of their party's incumbents for the nomination. Another 43 percent were willing to run in an incumbent-opposing primary—that is, in a primary that could earn them the right to oppose a Republican incumbent.[22] It stands to reason that somewhat more Republican politicians were willing to attempt political fratricide. Trump's low approval ratings and the dissatisfaction many Americans were feeling about the country's direction and the GOP Congress made Republican House members appear more vulnerable than their Democratic counterparts.

Table 2-1 The Effect of Seat Status on Nonincumbent Candidacies in 2018

	Democrats			Republicans		
	Elected Officials	Unelected Politicians	Political Amateurs	Elected Officials	Unelected Politicians	Political Amateurs
Open seat	47%	26%	22%	59%	38%	29%
Democratic incumbent seeking reelection	10	13	13	19	38	43
Republican incumbent seeking reelection	43	61	65	22	24	28
N	*195*	*309*	*698*	*168*	*218*	*412*

Source: Compiled from candidates' websites and other public sources.

The result was that 22 percent of the Republican elected officials who ran for the House in 2018 challenged a GOP lawmaker in the primary, and 19 percent ran in incumbent-opposing primaries to challenge a sitting House Democrat.

Unlike elected officials, unelected politicians and amateur candidates are more likely to view a seat held by an incumbent as an opportunity. These candidates have fewer political costs to weigh when considering whether to run for Congress. Prospective candidates who do not hold an elective office do not have to give up a current office to run for Congress, as do most officeholders whose positions are coterminous with congressional elections.[23] They also do not have to be as concerned about the effect a defeat could have on an established political career. This results in more of them entering a primary against one of their own party's incumbents or a primary that could result in their taking on an incumbent in the general election.

Those Involved in the Decision to Run

The drive to hold elective office may be rooted in an individual's personality and tempered by the larger political environment, but budding politicians hardly ever reach a decision about running for Congress without touching base with a variety of people.[24] Nearly all candidates single out their family and friends as being highly influential in their decision to enter a race.[25] Many talented, experienced, and well-connected local politicians who have wanted a seat in Congress have remarked, only half in jest, that family members would probably shoot them if they decided to run. Family concerns, financial considerations, and career aspirations have kept many ambitious and highly regarded community leaders from running for Congress.

Political parties, other organized groups, political activists, and consultants also can affect a prospective candidate's decision, but they have much less impact than the people directly involved in an individual's daily life. Those considering a run usually discuss their plans with these groups only after mulling over the idea with family members and friends. Sometimes would-be candidates approach local party leaders, party members in the House or the Senate, or officials from their party's state, national, congressional, or senatorial campaign committees to learn about the kinds of assistance that would be available should they decide to run. On other occasions the party initiates the contact, seeking to nurture the interest of good prospects.

Barred from simply handing out the nomination, party leaders can influence a prospective candidate's decision to run in a variety of ways. They can help size up the competition and try to encourage some and discourage others from contesting the nomination.[26] In some states party leaders can help a candidate secure a preprimary endorsement, but this does not guarantee nomination.

Members of Congress and the staffs of the Democratic and Republican congressional and senatorial campaign committees often encourage prospective candidates to run. Armed with favorable polling figures and the promise of party assistance in the general election, they search out local talent. Party leaders crisscross the country looking to sound out the best possible candidates for competitive districts. Sometimes they have a profile in mind, such as a candidate who can afford to self-finance most of the campaign. Since 2006 both parties have sought out military veterans to run for Congress, and roughly 340 ran in 2018.

Once the parties have identified promising individuals, they take steps to entice them to run. This can be a challenge in districts or states in which a congressional seat is occupied by a member of the opposing party and may not look winnable at first glance. To help convince individuals to contest these seemingly unattainable seats, party leaders invite them to meet with members of Congress and other political leaders in Washington and to attend campaign seminars. They also give potential candidates lists of political action committees (PACs) and political consultants who possess some of the resources and skills needed to conduct a congressional campaign.[27] Some are promised fundraising and campaign assistance by members of Congress and other politicians. Presidents, vice presidents, cabinet officials, high-ranking White House aides, or individuals who have previously held those posts also may try to entice a prospective candidate to enter the race. Obviously, a call to public service by the nation's commander-in-chief can be very motivating.

When more than one candidate runs for a nomination, national party committees traditionally have remained neutral unless a primary challenger seriously threatens an incumbent. Heightened competition for control over the House and Senate has led party leaders to reconsider this policy in recent years. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's (DCCC's) Red to Blue program and the National Republican Congressional Committee's (NRCC's) Young Guns program provide a small group of nonincumbents with campaign assistance, but only after the candidates have proven themselves effective campaigners. In addition, incumbent members of Congress have long been free to support primary candidates of their choosing. Many do so because they consider a preprimary contribution an opportunity to help elect a candidate who has a strong chance of winning, who shares their policy stances, or who is likely to support the incumbent's own advancement in the House or pursuit of a higher office.

Party recruitment is especially important and difficult when local or national forces favor the opposing party. Just as a strong economy or popular president encourages members of the president's party to run, it also can discourage members of the opposition party, most notably when an incumbent of the opposing party is seeking to remain in a seat. Sometimes the promise of party support can encourage a wavering politician to run under what at the outset appear to be less-than-optimal conditions.

Recruiting candidates to run for traditionally uncompetitive seats is not a major priority, but party committees work to prevent those seats from going uncontested. According to staffers from both parties' congressional and senatorial campaign committees, convincing candidates to run for these seats is an important part of building for the future. These efforts can expand the farm team from which congressional candidates emerge and strengthen state and local party committees by giving them a campaign on which to focus. They also help prepare a party for opportunities that might arise when an incumbent retires, House districts are redrawn, or a scandal or some other event changes the dynamics of the district.

After successfully recruiting large numbers of talented candidates and gaining a historic 63-seat pickup in 2010, then neither gaining nor losing large numbers of seats in the ensuing three elections, Republicans had relatively few opportunities for pickups in 2018. The Democrats, sensing that the 2018 political environment would work to their advantage in the general election, pursued a recruitment strategy that aimed to broaden the field of competition. In addition to focusing on the Democratic-leaning seats they had recently lost, the DCCC was active in many districts long considered Republican strongholds. Finding individuals to run against incumbents poses challenges, but in 2018 the DCCC succeeded in recruiting many strong candidates, including Dean Phillips, who defeated 10-term representative Erik Paulsen (R-MN) in a seat the Republicans had occupied for 58 consecutive years. Other DCCC recruits toppled Republican incumbents who held seats perennially claimed by the GOP.

The DCCC also worked with several Democratic congresswomen to recruit and support female candidates motivated by the #MeToo movement, the Women's March on Washington, and Judge Brett Kavanaugh's contentious Supreme Court confirmation hearings. Operating under the auspices of the DCCC's Red to Blue program, the new Elect Democratic Women program helped finance pro-choice female candidates in swing districts. Its PAC, also fittingly named Elect Democratic Women, distributed almost $127,000 to female House candidates and another $11,000 to female Senate candidates. Among the candidates the program initially supported were Mikie Sherrill, who won an open-seat race in New Jersey, and Lauren Underwood of Illinois and Katie Hill of California, each of whom defeated a Republican incumbent.[28]

Labor unions, PACs, and other organized groups traditionally play limited roles in candidate recruitment compared to parties. A few labor PACs and some trade association committees, such as the Committee on Political Education (COPE) of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the American Medical Association's AMPAC, take polls to encourage experienced politicians to run.[29] Others, such as the National Federation of Independent Business's PAC, sponsor campaign training seminars to encourage individuals who support the group's position to run for the House. Some ideological PACs search out members of specific demographic groups and offer them financial and organizational support.[30] The efforts of the pro-choice EMILY's List and the Women's Campaign Fund have resulted in more women running for federal, state, and local offices, and they contributed to the record number of women running for and winning a seat in the House in 2018.[31] The Club for Growth, a pro-Republican antitax group, and MoveOn.Org, which champions the causes of liberal Democrats, routinely support a small number of politicians who challenge an incumbent in the primary. The groups have helped these challengers attract media attention and raise money locally and from donors nationwide. In a few cases these candidates have wrested the nomination from a sitting incumbent.[32] Battling the ideological groups are organizations that share a party's pragmatic orientation, such as the Republican-allied American Crossroads, which encourages GOP moderates they anticipate will fare better in the general election. As one might expect, labor unions focus almost all of their candidate recruitment efforts, and campaign activities in general, on Democrats, and few corporate PACs become involved in recruiting candidates because they fear offending incumbents.

Political movements also can influence who enters the candidate pool, but their impact is sometimes short-lived. In 2010 the Tea Party movement provided inspiration, volunteers, political training, and financial support to staunch conservatives willing to run against establishment politicians in Republican primaries and Democrats in the general election. Its electoral influence began to fade in ensuing elections, in part due to the efforts of American Crossroads, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and other pragmatic GOP-allied groups to nominate mainstream Republicans with better general election prospects. In 2018 the #MeToo movement motivated thousands of women to run for federal, state, and local offices. Bolstered by the efforts of EMILY's List and other pro-choice groups, it also mobilized record numbers of female activists, donors, and voters in support of women candidates. The #MeToo movement's influence is likely to be felt for some time. Nevertheless, its long-term prospects are by no means certain. Indeed, some political movements fall victim to their own success because they lose energy once some of their goals are accomplished.

Finally, political consultants can become involved in a candidacy decision. In addition to taking polls and offering training seminars, consultants can assist a would-be candidate in assessing political conditions and sizing up the likely competition. Politicians who have had long-term relationships with consultants usually seek their advice before running for Congress.

Passing the Primary Test

There are two ways to win a major-party nomination for Congress: in an uncontested nominating race or by defeating an opponent. It is not unusual for incumbents to receive their party's nomination without a challenge. Even in the 1992 election cycle, which was marked by a record number of nonincumbent candidacies, 52 percent of all representatives and 42 percent of all senators who sought reelection were awarded their party's nomination without having to defeat an opponent. In 2018 roughly 46 percent of all representatives and 33 percent of all senators seeking reelection faced no primary opponent.

Incumbent Victories in Uncontested Primaries

A victory by default occurs mainly because the popularity, access to campaign resources, and between-election efforts of most members of Congress make them seem invincible to those contemplating a primary challenge. Good constituent relations, policy representation, and other job-related activities are sources of incumbent strength. Keeping one's campaign promises and co-opting the top issues raised by a previous challenger are good tactics for deterring opposition.[33] The same is true of amassing a hefty campaign account.[34]

The loyalties of political activists and organized groups also discourage party members from challenging their representatives for the nomination. While in office, members of Congress work to advance the interests of those who supported their previous election, and in return they routinely receive the support of these individuals and groups. This support generally includes the promise of endorsements, campaign contributions, volunteer campaign workers, and votes. Would-be primary challengers understand that the groups whose backing they would need to win the nomination are often among the incumbent's staunchest supporters.[35]

Freshmen and sophomores seldom have as much clout in Washington or as broad a base of support as senior legislators, but because they also devote a great deal of energy to cultivating constituents, they, too, typically discourage primary challenges.[36] Members lacking in seniority also may receive special attention from national, state, and local party organizations.

Both the DCCC and the NRCC hold seminars immediately after each election to instruct new legislators on how to use franked mail, town meetings, and the local media to solidify their hold on the district. Before the start of the campaign season, these party committees advise junior members on how to defend their congressional roll-call votes, raise money, and discourage opposition.

State party leaders also give junior members of Congress advice and assistance. During the redistricting process, many of these legislators receive what is perhaps the most important form of help state party leaders can bestow: a supportive district. Party leaders in state houses attempt to add areas with high concentrations of party identifiers who are predisposed to support the candidate. As a result, these candidates usually face little or no primary opposition and weak opposition in the general election.

Considerations of teamwork rarely protect those few members of Congress who are vulnerable because they have switched parties. These incumbents often face stronger challenges from within their new party than from outside it. The same is true of incumbents whose reputations are tainted by scandal.

Contested Primaries With an Incumbent

When incumbents face challenges for their party's nomination, they almost always win. Of the 202 House members who were challenged for the nomination in 2018, only 4 were defeated. Their losses give insights into the state of contemporary American politics. Ten-term representatives Joe Crowley (D-NY) and Michael Capuano (D-MA) fell out of step with Democratic primary voters seeking ideological, racial, and generational change. Six-term representative Mark Sanford (R-SC) and three-term representative Robert Pittenger (R-NC) were held accountable for their ethical transgressions.[37]

Which challengers succeed in knocking off an incumbent in a fight for the nomination? This question is difficult to answer because success is so unusual. In addition to a vulnerable incumbent, it usually takes a candidate who is a good fit for the district, has some political experience, or can raise substantial funds—and most often all three. Aware of the long odds, relatively few experienced politicians even try to oust a sitting member of their party. In 2018, for example, about 16 percent of those who sought to defeat one of their party's sitting House members had held elective office and 26 percent had nonelective political experience, leaving it to amateurs to complete the field.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ayanna Pressley exemplify one group of challengers who have bested an incumbent in a primary. Each had significant political experience and community ties: Ocasio-Cortez's work as a political organizer for left-wing causes and Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign established her liberal bona fides and made her a familiar face to many Democratic primary voters; and Pressley's four terms as an at-large member of the Boston City Council and prior experience as a senior aide to both former senator John Kerry and former representative Joseph P. Kennedy II (who had represented the district before Capuano) helped her form relationships with the individuals and groups active in the area's Democratic politics. Both challengers' background characteristics also were important: Ocasio-Cortez, a 29-year-old Puerto Rican American, was better able to connect with Hispanic voters, who had recently grown to 50 percent of the district population, than the 56-year-old white Crowley; and the 44-year-old African American Pressley was better than the 66-year-old Capuano at courting the support of Black and other minority voters, who had come to constitute over two-thirds of the district's voters. Both challengers also attracted financial and volunteer support from women and other liberal activists mobilized by the #MeToo movement. Finally, the two candidates tapped into voter dissatisfaction with government by campaigning as outsiders who would bring change to Washington.[38] Their primary victories were tantamount to winning a House seat. Pressley faced no general election opponent and would go on to become the first Black woman elected to Congress from Massachusetts. Ocasio-Cortez defeated a weak Republican opponent and became the youngest woman ever elected to Congress.

State representative Katie Arrington, who defeated Sanford in South Carolina, and Mark Harris, who bested Pittenger in North Carolina, exemplify challengers who knock off scandalized incumbents. Arrington, as a state legislator, represented many of the same voters as Sanford, and Harris established a high profile among Republican primary voters in 2016 when he fell 134 votes short of wresting the nomination from Pittenger. Their experiences gave both challengers the know-how, visibility, and financing needed to run a competitive campaign. Arrington's message reminded conservative GOP voters of Sanford's abandonment of his duties as South Carolina's governor so he could rendezvous with a mistress in Argentina and of the congressman's repeated tussles with President Trump. Her primary victory set the stage for her to run a spirited but ultimately unsuccessful general election campaign. Harris's communications called attention to the federal investigation seeking to determine whether in 2012 Pittenger illegally funneled money from his real-estate company to his House campaign. Harris also attacked the incumbent's vote for an omnibus spending bill that both denied funding for the president's border wall and included funds for sanctuary cities.[39] Startlingly, following Harris's win, allegations surfaced that his campaign had committed voter fraud when it had collected and turned in incomplete and unsealed mail-in ballots. North Carolina's bipartisan board of elections responded first by declining to certify the general election and then by calling for a new election. Harris opted not to run in the new election and may face perjury charges for allegedly presenting false testimony to the board.[40]

Open Primaries

In opposing-incumbent primaries, contestants seek the nomination of one party when an incumbent of the opposing party has decided to seek reelection. Another type of open nomination, called an open-seat primary, occurs in districts in which no incumbent is seeking reelection. Both types of primaries attract more candidates than do contests in which a nonincumbent must defeat an incumbent to win the nomination, but opposing-incumbent primaries are usually the less hotly contested of the two.

In opposing-incumbent primaries, political experience is usually a determining factor. In 2018 elected officials made up 12 percent of the Democratic candidates and 15 percent of the winners in these races (see Table 2-2).[41] They enjoyed a nomination rate of 36 percent. Among Republicans, elected officials comprised 11 percent of the candidates and 13 percent of the winners and had a success rate of 53 percent. Unelected politicians also did very well in opposing-incumbent primaries in 2018: The Democrats' success rate was 34 percent and the Republicans' was 61 percent. Political amateurs typically outnumber experienced candidates and consequently win more primaries. The contests in the 2018 election cycle were no exception. The elections also were typical in that the amateurs had much lower nomination rates than did candidates with more political experience.

Open-seat primaries attract many contenders and are the most competitive of all nominating races. They attract an abundance of highly qualified candidates, including many with officeholding experience. These candidates make up a large share of the primary winners and boast high rates of success. The 2018 elections were typical in that a mere 2 percent of all open-seat candidates were nominated without opposition, and the nomination rates for candidates with officeholding experience and unelected politicians were substantially higher than those for political amateurs.

The Democratic and Republican primaries in Nevada's Fourth District, like most open-seat primaries, were hard-fought contests. The seat became open when Democratic incumbent Rubén Jesús Kihuen Bernal retired under pressure from Democratic House leader Nancy Pelosi after a female campaign staffer accused him of sexual misconduct. Numerous individuals contemplated running for the House seat, and 12 major-party candidates and 4 others ultimately declared their candidacies.

Three of the six candidates who ran for the Democratic nomination had significant political experience: Steven Horsford, a businessman and the first African American to represent the district, who had been elected election and then by calling for a new election. Harris opted not to run in the new election and may face perjury charges for allegedly presenting false testimony to the board.[40]

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Table 2-2 Political Experience and Major-Party Nominations for the House in 2018

	Contest to Challenge an Incumbent in the General Election		Open-Seat Contest	
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
Level of experience				
Elected	12%	11%	28%	33%
Unelected	26	28	24	28
Amateur	63	61	48	40
N	*728*	*294*	*326*	*299*
Primary winners				
Elected	15%	13%	33%	45%
Unelected	32	38	36	37
Amateur	54	50	30	18
N	*202*	*136*	*65*	*65*
Primary success rates				
Elected	36%	53%	31%	31%
Unelected	34%	61%	23%	30%
Amateur	27%	40%	12%	10%

Source: Compiled from candidates' websites.

Notes: Figures are for nonincumbents only. Some columns do not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.

in 2012 and defeated by Republican Cresent Hardy two years later; Patricia Spearman, an African American retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel and member of the Nevada State Senate since 2012; and Allison Stephens, an African American elected member of the Nevada System of Higher Education since 2012. The others were Sid Zeller, a retired U.S. Marine lieutenant colonel and military contractor, who had challenged Horsford in the primary in 2014, and high school principal John Anzalone and health care activist Amy Vilela, both political amateurs. Horsford, the presumptive front-runner, was named a Red to Blue candidate about six weeks before Nevada's primary election filing deadline. The DCCC's endorsement clearly did not discourage the others from filing, but combined with the former congressman's political skills and contacts, the endorsement helped him amass almost $1.5 million before the primary. Vilela, who took out $11,000 in loans, led the others in fundraising with $198,000 in total receipts, followed by Spearman with $183,000, Stephens with $50,000, Anzalone with $8,000, and Zeller with less than the Federal Election Commission's $5,000 reporting requirement. Horsford's financial advantage enabled him to assemble the strongest campaign organization, and he was better known than the others as a result of his earlier House term. The former incumbent ended up winning the primary with almost 62 percent of the vote, giving him a 47-percentage-point margin over second-place finisher Spearman.[42]

The Republican primary was similar to the Democratic primary in several respects. It, too, had six contestants, including several with significant political experience, and it also was dominated by one candidate. Cresent Hardy, who defeated Horsford in 2014 and then lost to Bernal in 2016, easily won the nomination with almost 48 percent of the vote. He was the most visible and skilled politician, and he was able to rely on previous backers from his previous campaign for contributions and volunteer support. David Gibbs, a former Clark County Republican chair, Air Force pilot, and program manager at Battlespace Flight Services, came in second with 19 percent. Billionaire and computer technology entrepreneur Bill Townsend, onetime candidate for a House seat in New Jersey, came in third, followed by Kenneth Wegner, a Gulf War combat veteran and volunteer bail enforcement agent who had been defeated twice in a neighboring House district by Democratic representative Shelley Berkley. The final two candidates were Jeff Miller, vice president of operations of Nevada's biggest horse-riding company, and local carpenter Mike Monroe. As was the case with the Democrats, there were sharp disparities in the candidates' abilities to raise money. Hardy amassed $395,000 to contest the primary, while Gibbs and Townsend each raised about $30,000 (most of it from themselves) and Wegner, Miller, and Monroe each raised less than $5,000.

These contests support some generalizations about primaries for open seats. First, they attract numerous candidates, including many with significant political experience. Second, they can be expensive. Third, the lack of an incumbent increases the importance of name recognition and campaign spending. Finally, geographic ties remain helpful, though not essential, to a political career in the United States' increasingly nationalized political system.

Nominations, Elections, and Representation

The electoral process—which transforms private citizen to candidate to major-party nominee to House member—greatly affects the makeup of the national legislature. Those parts of the process leading up to the general election, especially the decision to run, are important in producing a Congress that falls short of demographically representing the American people.

The willingness of women and minorities to run for Congress during the past few decades, and voters', activists', and donors' support of them, has helped make the national legislature somewhat more representative in regard to gender and race. Still, in many respects, Congress does not mirror U.S. society.

Occupation

Occupation has a tremendous effect on the pool of House candidates and on their prospects for success. Individuals who claim law, politics, or public service as their major profession comprise only about 2 percent of the working-age population, but in the 2018 elections they made up about 22 percent of all nomination candidates and 31 percent of all general election candidates.[43] In the 116th Congress they comprised 44 percent of all House members (see Table 2-3). The analytical, verbal, and organizational skills required to succeed in these professions are well suited to the campaign trail. The salaries they earn give many members of these professions the means to take a leave of absence from work to campaign full-time and the ability to invest the seed money needed to get a campaign off the ground. Moreover, many attorneys and public servants, particularly those who already hold office, are in a position to rub elbows with the political activists and contributors whose support can be crucial to getting elected.

Business professionals and bankers, comprising 10 percent of the population, also are well represented among nomination and general election candidates, but they constitute 28 percent of House members. Many possess the money, interpersonal skills, and contacts useful in politics. Educators (particularly college professors), members of the medical profession, and other white-collar professionals also enjoy a modicum of success in congressional elections. Some may not have accumulated the wealth of lawyers and business professionals, but many have the analytical, organizational, and verbal talents needed to get elected.

Just as some professions are overrepresented in Congress, others are underrepresented. Although both parties have taken to recruiting veterans in recent years, less than 18 percent of the House members in the 116th Congress have done some form of military service, and only eight representatives and three senators are drawn from the ranks of the career military. Disproportionately few agricultural and blue-collar employees run for Congress or are elected. Even fewer students, homemakers, and others considered outside the workforce attempt to win a congressional seat.

Table 2-3 Occupational Representativeness of House Candidates in 2018 and Members of the 116th Congress

	General Population	Nomination Candidates	General Election Candidates	House Members
Agriculture/blue collar	23%	5%	4%	2%
Business or banking	10	32	31	28
Clergy or social work	1	4	5	4
Education	4	9	9	8
Entertainer, actor, writer, artist	1	4	3	2
Law	1	11	16	23
Politics or public service	1	11	15	21
Health care	5	6	7	6
Military	—	2	2	3
Other white collar	19	8	5	3
Outside workforce	35	5	2	1
Unidentified, not politics	—	3	1	—
N, in millions	*224.9*	*2,376*	*841*	*434*

Sources: Population figures are from U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010); candidate data are compiled from candidates' websites and other sources.

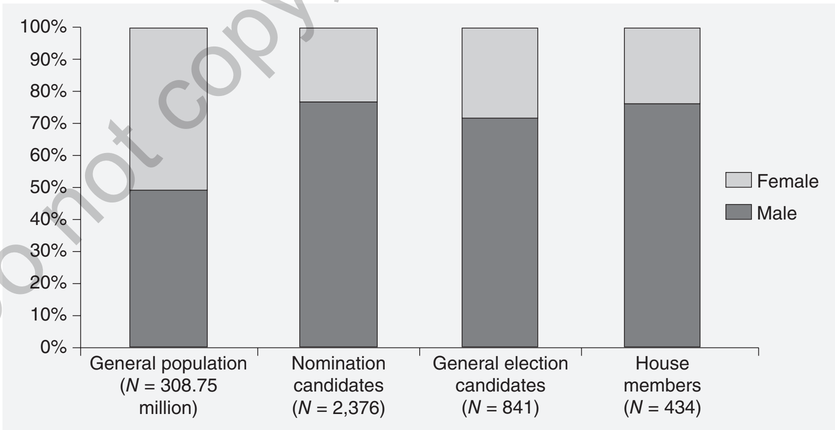
Notes: Figures include major-party House candidates and House members. Missing is a House member to represent North Carolina's ninth district because the election was overturned by that state's board of elections. The Census Bureau calculates occupation figures for individuals aged 16 and older. Dash (—) indicates less than 0.5%. Some columns do not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

Closely related to the issue of occupation is wealth. Personal wealth is a significant advantage in an election system that places a premium on a candidate's ability to raise and spend money, and many of those who win a seat in the House or Senate would fit comfortably in the social circles of the rich and famous. Led by Representative Darrell Issa (R-CA), whose net worth totaled $283 million, were 43 members of the 115th Congress whose assets exceeded $10 million. They were followed by another 7 members whose wealth totaled more than $7.5 million, and an additional 153 who were millionaires.[44] Given the high costs associated with running for Congress, the emergence and success of wealthy candidates is a trend that is likely to continue.

Gender

A record-setting 102 women were elected to the House in 2018—constituting roughly 24 percent of its members (see Figure 2-4). Despite these historic gains, women continue to be underrepresented in the corridors of power, mainly because fewer women than men run for office. Just over 23 percent of all contestants for major-party nominations in 2018 were female. Women are underrepresented among congressional candidates for many reasons. Active campaigning demands more time and flexibility than most people, particularly women, can afford. Although some evidence suggests this may be changing, women's traditional parenting responsibilities are difficult to reconcile with long hours of campaigning.[45] Only since the 1980s have significant numbers of women entered the legal and business professions, which often serve as training grounds for elected officials and political activists. Despite their making significant gains over the past few decades, fewer women than men serve in state legislatures and the other

Figure 2-4 Gender Representativeness of House Candidates in 2018 and Members of the 116th Congress



Sources: Population figures are from U.S. Census Bureau, "QuickFacts," https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/SEX255217; candidate data were compiled from candidates' websites and other sources.

Note: Figures include major-party House candidates and House members.

elective offices that commonly serve as stepping-stones to Congress. Whether right or wrong, women who occupy positions in society from which congressional candidates usually emerge are less likely than similarly situated men to believe they possess the qualifications, skills, or traits needed to campaign for or hold public office.[46] It also should be noted that the 2018 midterms were somewhat of a watershed for gender identity, as the number of members who were openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, or asexual—commonly referred to as LGBTQIA—grew to eight in the House and two in the Senate.[47]

Nevertheless, once women decide to run, gender does not undermine their election prospects. Indeed, although they typically face more competition in congressional primaries, women are slightly more likely than men to advance from primary candidate to nominee to House member. As more women occupy lower-level offices or hold positions in the professions from which congressional candidates usually emerge, one can expect more women to consider a bid for Congress, run, and get elected.[48] This was made abundantly clear in 2018, when an unusually large number of politically experienced female candidates ran for and were elected to Congress.

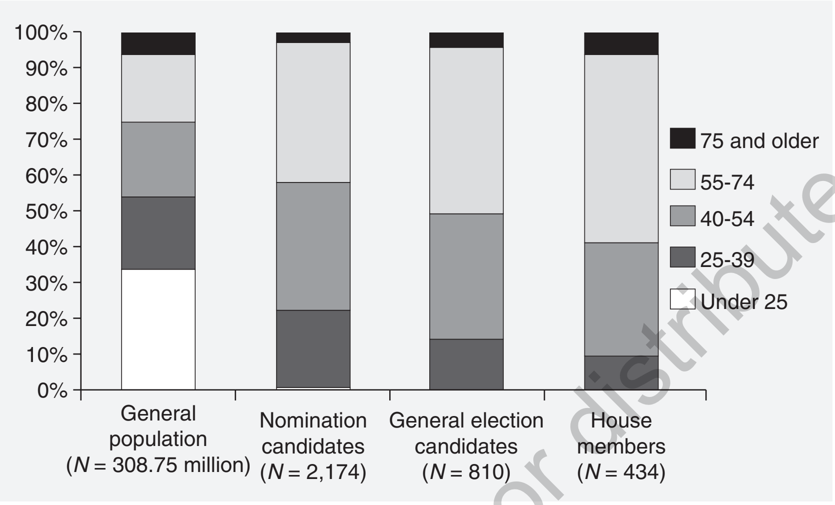
Although hardly representative of U.S. politics and society, Nevada may be a harbinger of women's future in politics. In 2019 women held a majority of the seats in each of its legislative chambers, accounted for four of its seven supreme court justices, constituted half of its four-person U.S. House delegation, and filled both of its seats in the U.S. Senate.

Age

Congressional candidates are somewhat older than the general population, and this is due only partly to the age requirements imposed by the Constitution. Almost 40 percent of candidates for nomination are between 55 and 74 years of age, almost twice as many as those between 25 and 40 (see Figure 2-5). Moreover, successful nomination candidates tend to be older than those whom they defeat. There is a strong selection bias in favor of those who are 55 and older that continues into the general election; as a result, Congress is made up largely of persons who are middle-aged or older.

The lack of young people is due to an electoral process that enables others to benefit from their greater life experience. People who have reached middle age typically have greater financial resources, are better able to navigate political and social situations, and have a wider network of associates to help fund and carry out their campaigns. Moreover, a formidable group of people who are 40 to 74 years old—current representatives—also benefit from considerable incumbency advantages.

Figure 2-5 Age Representativeness of House Candidates in 2018 and Members of the 116th Congress



Sources: Population figures are from U.S. Census Bureau, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC_10_DP_DPDP1&src=pt; candidate data were compiled from candidates' websites and other sources.

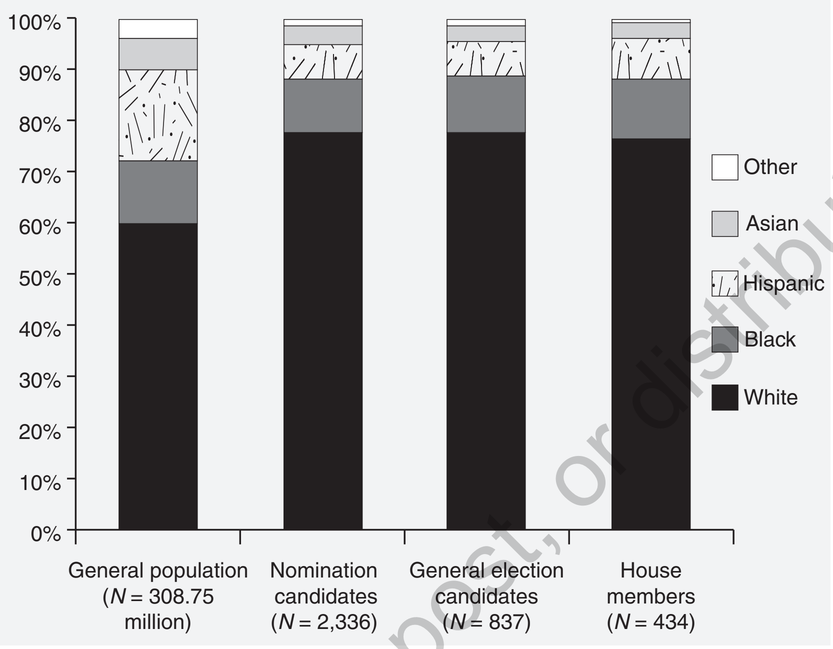
Note: Figures include major-party House candidates and House members only.

Race and Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity, like gender, have a greater effect on candidate emergence than on electoral success.[49] Whites are heavily overrepresented in the pool of nomination candidates, whereas persons of other races are underrepresented (see Figure 2-6). This situation is informed, at least in part, by the disproportionately few minorities in the legal and business professions and occupying state and local offices.

Once politicians from traditionally underrepresented groups declare their candidacies, they have fairly good odds of winning their party's nomination and getting elected. The recent successes in House elections are largely due to redistricting processes intended to promote minority representation.[50] Most minority candidates are elected in districts where many voters share their racial or ethnic identity, and once they win these seats, they tend to hold on to them until another member of their minority group replaces them. However, a few House members, such as Mia Love (R-UT), who was elected for two terms beginning in 2014, win seats in districts that were not specifically carved to promote minority representation.

Figure 2-6 Racial and Ethnic Representativeness of House Candidates in 2018 and Members of the 116th Congress



Sources: Population figures are from U.S. Census Bureau, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC_10_DP_DPDP1&src=pt; candidate data were compiled from candidates' websites and other sources.

Note: Figures include major-party House candidates and all House members.

The success of these minority members of Congress can be attributed to their ability to build multiracial coalitions and the advantages incumbency confers on them.[51]

Religion

Religion is central to many people's values and political motivations, so it should come as little surprise that most nomination candidates, nominees, and members of Congress claim a religious belief. What is interesting is the representation different religious groups receive. For example, 48 percent of the population self-identifies as Protestant, as do 55 percent of the members of the 116th Congress. At 21 percent of the population and 31 percent of all members of Congress, Catholics are even more overrepresented, and Jews constitute less than 2 percent of all Americans but hold more than 6 percent of all House seats. Finally, those who claim no religious affiliation account for about 23 percent of all Americans but less than 1 percent of Congress's members.[52] Why do individuals who claim no religious identification make up the smallest "faith" group in Congress? People who do not participate in church activities typically have fewer political and civic skills compared with those who do, and this may discourage them from running for Congress.[53] Atheists and agnostics also may believe that it is impossible for them to get elected, given the large role organized religion plays in politics in many parts of the country.

Party Differences

There are similarities in the backgrounds of Democratic and Republican candidates and members of Congress, but there are also significant differences. For instance, as noted earlier, lawyers and public servants have a large presence in each party's candidate pool, but considerably more Democratic candidates are drawn from their ranks, whereas more Republican candidates come from the business world (see Table 2-4). The GOP's overrepresentation of business professionals continues through virtually each stage of the election, as does Democrats' overrepresentation of lawyers and career politicians. Even though Republicans have been viewed historically as the defenders of the rich, most members of Congress of both parties have incomes that are significantly higher than those of the typical voter.

One long-standing truism in congressional elections is that most female House candidates run as Democrats, and Democratic women are more successful in winning the nomination and getting elected than their GOP counterparts. These differences were on full display in 2018. Women accounted for more than 40 percent of all Democratic primary candidates and 30 percent of the party's nominees, compared to only 13 percent and 14 percent, respectively, for the Republicans. More significant, women's representation in the House Democratic Caucus surged from 33 percent in the 115th Congress to 38 percent in the 116th, while women's representation in the House Republican Conference fell by 2 percentage points to a mere 7 percent. The congressional gender gap is informed by most women identifying with the Democratic Party and preferring its policy positions, and the Democrats' greater efforts to encourage and support female candidates.

Democratic candidates and House members also come from a wider array of racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Substantially more Democratic nomination candidates, nominees, and House members are African American, Hispanic, Catholic, or Jewish. The Republicans, by contrast, are overwhelmingly white and include more mainstream and evangelical Protestants and other Christians.

Table 2-4 Major-Party Nomination and General Election Candidates in 2018 and House Members of the 116th Congress

	Nomination Candidates		General Election Candidates		House Members	
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
Occupation						
Agriculture/blue collar	4%	6%	3%	5%	—	4%
Business or banking	26	42	25	40	24	34
Clergy or social work	6	2	7	2	5	2
Education	12	4	14	3	12	4
Entertainer, actor, writer, artist	4	4	4	3	2	2
Law	12	8	18	15	24	21
Politics or public service	13	9	17	8	25	17
Medicine	6	7	5	3	4	9
Military	1	2	1	13	—	4
Other white collar	8	6	5	4	3	4
Outside workforce	5	5	2	3	—	—
Unidentified, not politics	3	5	—	1	—	—
Gender						
Male	58%	87%	70%	86%	62%	94%
Female	42	13	30	14	38	7
Age						
25–39	25%	17%	18%	11%	11%	8%
40–54	35	36	35	34	30	34
55–74	37	44	43	52	52	55
75 and up	3	2	4	3	8	4
Race and Ethnicity						
White	73%	85%	69%	87%	60%	96%
African American	14	5	17	4	21	1
Hispanic	7	7	8	6	12	3
Other	6	3	7	3	7	1
N	*1,278–1,377*	*896–1,000*	*432–442*	*378–399*	*235*	*199*

Sources: Compiled from candidates' websites and other public sources.

Notes: Figures are for major-party House candidates and House members only. Missing is a House member to represent North Carolina's ninth district because the election was overturned by that state's board of elections. Dash (—) indicates less than 0.5%. Some columns do not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

The Senate

The Senate historically has been less demographically representative than the House. The election of more women and minorities during the past few decades has resulted in slow movement toward more accurate demographic representation. However, descriptions of the Senate as a bastion for white, wealthy, middle-aged, professional men are close to the mark.

Part of the reason the Senate has been slower to change than the House is that Senate terms are for six years and only one-third of the upper chamber is up for election at a time. Other reasons have to do with the greater demands of Senate campaigns. Because they are statewide races, Senate campaigns require more money and better planning. They also have a smaller margin for error because they are subjected to more media scrutiny. Successful Senate candidates generally possess more skill, political connections, and campaign experience than their House counterparts. The fact that so many senators are seasoned politicians prior to joining the upper chamber also helps explain why the Senate's demographics are slow to change. To gain seats in the upper chamber, a group has to first place its members in the positions that serve as stepping-stones to that body. As more women, African Americans, and members of other underrepresented groups are elected or appointed to local, state, and federal offices, their presence will probably increase in the Senate.

Still, a single election can have a noticeable effect on the Senate's makeup. After the polls closed in 1992, the number of women was set to increase from two to six, including the Senate's first African American woman, Illinois Democrat Carol Moseley Braun. In addition, the Senate prepared to swear in its first Native American, Coloradan Ben Nighthorse Campbell. Following the 2018 election, the Senate contained 25 women, 3 African Americans, 4 Hispanics, 3 Asian Americans, and 2 LGBTQIA members.

The upper chamber also is unrepresentative with respect to its members' professions. Lawyers typically dominate the Senate, and the 116th Congress is no exception. The banking and business sectors also are very well represented. Fewer members of the Senate are drawn from the ranks of educators, medical doctors, and journalists. The Senate lost its only professional comedian—Senator Al Franken (D-MN)—in early January 2018, when he resigned following a sexual harassment scandal. The average age for a senator was 63 when the 116th Congress was sworn in. Most senators have significant political experience prior to getting elected, and they often have held more than one elective office. Forty-nine of the senators in the 116th Congress had previously served in the U.S. House of Representatives, 16 had been governor of their state, and another 69 had begun their career in the state legislature or a local office.

Slightly over half had some nonelective political experience, and only 2 were political amateurs.

Although senators are more likely than representatives to need to defend their nominations, Senate primaries tend to be less competitive than those for the House. Between 1982 and 2016, only seven senators lost a nomination fight. None were defeated in 2018. The relative ease with which most senators retain their party's nomination can be attributed to factors besides the tremendous demands a Senate primary makes on a challenger. For one thing, those who occupy or aspire to a seat in Congress's upper chamber are highly strategic. As they are knowledgeable about the advantages of incumbency and aware that their party's senatorial campaign committee will rise to the defense of a sitting incumbent who is challenged for the nomination, the best-qualified potential challengers often wait until one of their state's senators retires. Moreover, like their counterparts in the House, members of the Senate use their office to help their state receive its share of federal projects, to garner positive coverage in the press, and to build support among voters. They also try to legislate on issues raised in previous campaigns and build huge campaign treasuries to discourage opposition.[54]

In addition, most members of the Senate are shrewd enough to acknowledge when it is time to step down. Senator Thad Cochran (R-MI), an octogenarian suffering from poor health, and the embattled Franken resigned before completion of their terms. Another three senators opted not to run for reelection: Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT) retired at the age of 84, perhaps after feeling some pressure to step aside from Mitt Romney; Senator Bob Corker (R-TN), first elected in 2006, fulfilled his pledge to serve only two terms; and Senator Jeff Flake (R-AZ), who had been publicly feuding with President Trump, decided to step aside after watching his support drop in the polls and encountering the enmity of Republican activists. The retirees of 2018 amply demonstrate that scandal, aging, infirmity, declining public support, and strategic ambition affect Senate turnover more through retirements than primary defeats.

When an incumbent does announce an upcoming retirement or a member of the opposite party appears vulnerable, political parties and interest groups help to shape the field of Senate candidates by promising the same types of support, under the same kinds of circumstances, as they offer House candidates. In 2018, for example, the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) played a significant role in encouraging Attorney General Josh Hawley to challenge two-term Democratic senator Claire McCaskill in Missouri and in urging Governor Rick Scott to take on three-term Democratic incumbent Bill Nelson in Florida.[55] The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC) and Senate minority leader Harry Reid helped recruit Democratic representative Jacky Rosen to contest the seat Reid would vacate at the end of the 115th Congress.[56]

Traditionally, party organizations have not become involved in contested Senate primaries, even though they may promise a candidate from hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars in campaign support if he or she wins the nomination. The most significant exception to this rule, raised earlier, is when an incumbent faces a difficult challenge. Under this circumstance, the DSCC and NRSC, like their House counterparts, support the incumbent. In 2014, for example, the NRSC was heavily involved in protecting Senator Cochran from a formidable primary challenge by Tea Party–backed GOP state senator Chris McDaniel. Cochran lost the Republican primary, but because McDaniel won with less than a majority of the vote, as is required in Mississippi, the nomination race proceeded to a runoff. Over the course of the primary and runoff, the NRSC spent almost $358,000 in support of Cochran. It also provided opposition research, fundraising assistance, strategic support, and communications help. In fact, it went as far as to leak some racially charged remarks made by McDaniel to the media. Once the runoff had been decided, the NRSC worked to help heal the breach that had emerged during the nomination contest, and Cochran went on to defeat former Democratic congressman Travis Childers in the general election by a 21 percent vote margin.[57] In general, both parties' senatorial campaign committees seek to unite the party behind the victor following a divisive nomination contest and, if needed, invest heavily in the general election that follows.

Senatorial campaign committees are singled out by candidates as the most influential organizations involved in the candidate recruitment process. They are not as important as an individual's family and friends, concerns about important issues, or desire to improve government or become a national leader, but they are more influential in the decisions of candidates than are other political organizations.[58] In this sense, candidate emergence in Senate elections is similar to that in the House.

SUMMARY

Virtually anyone can run for Congress, because there are few legal requirements for serving, and neither party committees nor interest groups have the power to simply hand out a congressional nomination. Strategic politicians, mainly individuals who have held office or have some other significant nonelective experience, carefully assess political conditions before deciding to run. Most incumbents—who are the most strategic of all politicians—choose to run again, but personal considerations, a loss of political clout in Congress, redistricting, scandal, or a wave of voter hostility toward the federal government or the incumbents' party can encourage them to retire. These factors also have an impact on the candidacy decisions of strategic nonincumbents, but the opening of a congressional seat is an even bigger factor in these cases. Amateur politicians tend to be less discriminating and are less likely to win their party's nomination.

Candidate emergence, nomination, and election processes have a substantial impact on who serves in Congress. Most members of the contemporary House and Senate are white, middle- or upper-class males. Most are middle-aged or older and belong to a mainstream religion. The vast majority also have significant political experience prior to getting elected. Overall, the number of national legislators who belong to underrepresented groups has increased in recent years, but change comes slowly to Congress, especially in the Senate.