

## Midterm Wave Elections: The Effects of Candidate Quality and Ideology on Reelection

Jonathan Simpson, Xavier University '11

*The causes of seat change in midterm elections have been debated for decades. Some political scientists believe seat change is caused by heightened national conditions; others argue seat change is a result of conditions within districts. Political scientists agree however that candidate quality affects election outcomes. In general, the party that recruits the highest quality candidates and runs them in the most strategic districts will win the most seats. As this study reveals, when national conditions are favorable for one party, quality candidates from that party will run, while those from the other party will wait for a more opportune time. This "strategic politician theory" is particularly evident in wave elections. Large seat turnovers result in the election of quality candidates for the favored party, but because so many seats are won, non-quality candidates get elected as well. This study explains high seat turnover means for subsequent contests.*

There is no doubt that the 1994 and 2006 midterm elections were non-typical. The 1994 "Republican Revolution" was the first time in 40 years that Republicans won a majority in the House of Representatives, with the Democrats losing a whopping 52 seats. Indeed, the 1994 midterm results were more devastating to the president's party than any midterm since 1946 (Campbell 1997). Similarly, the 2006 midterm election was a major defeat for Republicans who lost control of both bodies of Congress after losing 31 seats in the House and 6 seats in the Senate.

Elections like 1994 and 2006 are commonly referred to as wave elections because the turnover of seats from one party to the other is significantly higher than in normal years. Political scientists disagree on the causes of wave elections. Some believe wave elections occur as a result of permanent partisan shifts in the electorate. More likely, wave elections are the result of national conditions enhanced by the decision-making process of politicians. According to Jacobson and Kernell's "strategic politician theory," when a party is favored by national conditions, that party will be able to recruit high-quality candidates (1981). High-quality candidates bring massive funding with them, and run highly visible campaigns that stress salient issues. In other words, candidates respond to national issues, and voters respond to candidates and campaigns.

Not surprisingly, wave years result in the election of higher quality candidates for the favored party, but because there are so many new members that get elected, there are also a higher number of non-quality candidates that ride the wave to victory. Because non-quality candidates, by definition, lack political experience, they may be more likely to lose than their quality counterparts. Moreover, there is evidence that freshmen elected in wave years are ideologically more extreme than other candidates, which may make them more vulnerable to defeat in subsequent elections.

Strategic politician theory suggests that the party on the upswing will recruit top quality candidates in wave election years, but did this theory hold true in 2006? More importantly, because past wave elections resulted in a higher percentage of non-quality and ideologically extreme candidates, did the election of Democrats' non-quality candidates in 2006 plant the seeds for the Republican comeback in 2010?

---

\* Jonathan Simpson received his B.A. in Political Science from Xavier University in 2011. A previous version of this paper was presented at the Midwest Political Science Conference in Chicago Illinois in March, 2011.

## Literature Review

In order to understand why wave elections occur and how these elections affect the outcome of future elections, we must consider how individuals make the decision to run for office, the importance of incumbency, and national and local election conditions.

### **Political Ambition and Challenger Emergence**

Fox and Lawless (2005) argue that the decision to run for office has two distinct stages. In the first stage, a person considers (or fails to consider) running for office. Though this consideration can take place at any point during one's life, for most people it occurs in the pre-teen or teenage years. Once an individual has considered running for elected office, the second stage of the process is when they decide to enter their first race (Fox and Lawless 2005). In this stage, candidates conform to a rational decision making model (Lazarus 2008). The decision to run comes when a candidate realizes the benefits from getting elected outweigh the costs of running and losing. Included in this decision is the candidate's chance of winning. If the candidate calculates a 99% chance of losing (even if the benefits of winning are immense), he or she is unlikely to enter the race.

There are two main situations that candidates consider when deciding whether or not to enter the political arena: local conditions and national conditions. For those who decide to challenge an incumbent, the local conditions include the vulnerability of the incumbent. Incumbent vulnerability differs depending on the candidates, but there are some key factors. For example, incumbents with low approval ratings, or those who have cast an unpopular vote, been marred by a scandal, or won by a slim percentage in the previous election are viewed as more vulnerable and are therefore more likely to attract quality challengers (Lazarus 2008; Banks and Kiewiet 1989).<sup>1</sup> In addition, incumbents who do not match the partisan character of their districts are also more likely to attract quality challengers (Bond et. all 1985).

Where weak incumbents attract quality challengers, strong incumbents have the ability to scare them off. It is more difficult for parties to recruit quality challengers to run against an incumbent who trounced their opponent in the previous election (Krasno and Green 1988). Indeed, Jacobson (1989) finds that how well an incumbent did in the last election is a key factor that challengers consider when deciding whether or not to run. The greater the incumbent's margin of victory in the last race, the lower the quality of the challenger in the reelection race. Some scholars believe that incumbents can scare off quality challengers by raising a lot of campaign money before the election season even begins (Katz 1996), though others argue that incumbent spending is a non-factor (Krasno and Green 1988).

The decision making process of potential challengers is also affected by a candidate's prospect of getting his or her party's nomination. If a quality challenger decides to run against a vulnerable incumbent, non-quality challengers may decide not to run because they will likely lose the primary (Banks and Kiewiet 1989). Weak challengers – those with little or no political experience – will challenge invulnerable incumbents because they see an opportunity to win their party's primary. Non-quality candidates that come close to knocking off the incumbent gain experience, and by default, improve their quality. Clearly, for a candidate with little or no political experience, it is better to challenge an incumbent than to wait for an open seat.

The state economy can also have an impact on a challenger's decision. The strength of the economy is typically measured by the percentage change in state-level real personal income in the period from 2 years to 1 year prior to the election (Lazarus 2008). During good economic times, challengers perceive incumbents to be less vulnerable. Conversely, challengers may

---

<sup>1</sup> Although there are different factors determining challenger quality, the strongest factor is a candidate's political experience. If a candidate has held previous state-wide office and is running for a House or Senate seat, he will be viewed as a quality candidate. Those who have never held political office will usually be viewed as non-quality.

perceive a weak economy as an opportunity to lay the blame at the feet of the incumbent, which gives challengers another reason to run. In short, if the state economy is strong, the incumbent is less likely to attract a quality challenger.

National conditions also affect the quality of candidates that emerge in congressional elections. The president's popularity is one factor that corresponds with candidate quality. According to the strategic politicians theory (Jacobson and Kernell 1981), in midterm elections, the quality of candidates the out-party fields is correlated to the popularity of the incumbent party's president. When the incumbent party's president has low approval ratings and the national economy is seen as weak, the out-party will field more quality challengers and the incumbent party will lose seats. This pattern can be observed in the 1994 and 2006 elections in which the out-party (Republicans in 1994 and Democrats in 2006) were able to recruit a large number of high-quality candidates. In the 2006 election, for example, there were five incumbent Republican Senators with approval ratings below 51% -- all five faced Democratic challengers with statewide experience (Brown and Jacobson 2007). Similarly, Republicans in 1994 fielded quality challengers in open seats and against vulnerable incumbents.

Along with the president's approval score, candidates also consider the state of the national economy. The strength of the economy can be measured by the change in real per-capita income in the period two years prior to the election (Buchanan and Klarner 2006). In the United States, the condition of the national economy is typically attributed to the president and the party in power. If the national economy is weak, we can expect the emergence of quality out-party candidates.

The effect of national conditions on election outcomes remains the subject of considerable debate. Jacobson and Kernell (1981) propose that the effects of national conditions are exaggerated by the behavior of strategic politicians because high-quality candidates run when national factors appear to favor a party. High-quality candidates bring with them massive funding that allows them to run highly-visible campaigns that call voters' attention to salient issues. In other words, candidates respond to national issues, and voters respond to the candidates and their campaigns. The election of 1974 is a good example, as a national recession and the Watergate scandal led to the Republican Party losing 48 seats in the House (Abramowitz 1985). In the weeks leading up to the election, Democrats hounded Republican candidates for the Republican president's mistakes. Similarly, in 2006, Democrats used the unpopular war in Iraq to attack Republicans, which contributed to heavy Republican losses in that cycle.

Other scholars contend that election outcomes cannot be attributed to changes in national forces. Burden and Wichowsky, for instance, point out that between the years of 1866 and 1994 the president's party lost House seats in every midterm election. Moreover, the president's party lost seats even when the economy was strong. From this, Burden and Wichowsky conclude that the turnover of seats in midterm elections is due to voters' desire to balance the president's ideology. In other words, the electorate uses Congress to keep the president's power in check. Further, they contend that lower turnout in midterm elections is also likely to hurt the president's party, which was overrepresented in the previous election.

### ***Incumbency Advantage***

The most important factor in candidate success in any election—midterm or presidential year is incumbency. Even in the massive turnover years of 1994 and 2006, 90% and 94% of incumbents won reelection, respectively. Incumbents have a number of advantages over challengers, including access to taxpayer-provided resources such as office administration, telephones and computers, postal privileges, transportation, and free publicity through sound bites, TV spots and other media (Marsh and Benoit 2008).

Furthermore, incumbents' access to "free" campaign resources has led to the creation of

continuous campaigns (Marsh and Benoit 2008). Incumbents often use the free mail system to saturate their districts with information about themselves months before formal campaigns begin. In addition, incumbents have a distinct fundraising advantage over challengers because they have a list of donors from past elections (Streb 2008). Incumbents can call on donors at anytime during the election and because their donor lists are large, contribution limits do not serve as a substantial limitation to securing sufficient funding.<sup>2</sup>

The final and arguably most significant advantage that incumbents have over challengers is name recognition. Incumbents always have more recognition than their challengers, due to the use of “free” resources, especially TV spots, radio sound bites and news reports on their legislative exploits. Challengers, on the other hand, usually begin the campaign in obscurity, and because voters are reluctant to vote for candidates they know nothing about, challengers can gain a lot by making themselves better known (Marsh and Benoit 2008). Name recognition gives incumbents a financial advantage as well, as donors are more likely to give money to well-known incumbents than obscure challengers. Thus challengers face a vicious cycle in which they cannot raise money because they are unlikely to win and they are unlikely to win because they have trouble raising money (Streb 2008). It is no wonder, then, that the usual incumbent reelection rate for Congress is about 95% (Marsh and Benoit 2008).

### ***Favorable National Conditions Reduce the Incumbency Effect***

According to Ragsdale (1981), one of the biggest advantages that incumbents have is name recognition. Most constituents will know who their congressman or woman is when the election comes around due to TV spots, direct mail, etc. Challengers are often invisible to the district voters because they do not have the resources to get their name and message out there to the same effect that incumbents can. This phenomenon results in a bland view of the challenger by the voters. Quality challengers are exceptions to this trend. According to Jacobson (1989), challengers who have political experience (making them quality challengers) can reduce the incumbent’s previous vote margin by as much as 5 percentage points. Clearly, favorable national conditions bring out quality candidates which results in a drop in the incumbency effect during these wave elections.

Candidates of the favored party often emphasize national conditions in their campaigns. In 2006, for example, Democrats reminded voters that their Republican opponents had voted in favor of the invasion of Iraq and tied them to the unpopular incumbent Republican in the White House (President Bush’s approval rating was 38%). By focusing on salient issues, the Democratic candidates made the election a referendum on the Iraq war and George W. Bush.

Favorable national conditions bring out quality candidates who are well financed. As noted above, obscure challengers have trouble raising money because they are obscure. Quality candidates are typically well known and therefore have less trouble raising money for their campaigns. In campaigns, spending is subject to the laws of diminishing marginal returns: because incumbents already have great recognition among the electorate, additional spending does not add much to voter knowledge of or support for the incumbent candidate (Marsh and Benoit 2008). Sam Geduldig, a Republican strategist, said of the 2006 midterm election: “My hunch is that we outspent Democrats in competitive races by 4-to-1 or 5-to-1...but it didn’t matter. At the end of the day, money is important until it is not” (Victor 2010).

Unlike incumbents, challengers usually continue to gain from additional spending. Voters usually know less about challengers, and thus, spending can increase a challenger’s name

---

<sup>2</sup> Due their access to resources, incumbents are able to produce more donors in a short amount of time which in turn helps them raise money. So in most cases, the only way that contribution limits effect incumbents is their fundraising strategies. Commonly, incumbents will begin to raise money for their next election before a challenger even entertains the thought of running.

recognition and favorability. In short, the more money a challenger can raise, the more likely he or she is to do well in the election. Favorable national conditions bring out quality challengers for the favored party, which helps reduce the advantages that incumbents have in name recognition, fundraising and other factors critical to a successful campaign.

### ***Extreme and Unlikely Candidates?***

Wave years bring out quality candidates for the party expected to do well and in many cases, many of these quality candidates go on to win the election. Though the vast majority of non-quality candidates in midterm wave years fail to win election, some non-quality candidates are able to ride the wave and pull off surprise victories. Obviously, favorable national conditions reduce the incumbency effect which heightens the prospect that any challenger will knock off a safe incumbent. While quality candidates typically run for open seats or against vulnerable incumbents, non-quality candidates are more likely to challenge safe incumbents in the outside hope of pulling off an upset. Compared with normal elections, the number of surprise victories by non-quality candidates is likely to increase in wave years.<sup>3</sup>

According to the literature, the election of non-quality candidates may fuel an opposing party comeback for a number of reasons. First, in wave years, the out-party fields high quality candidates to run for competitive open seats and against vulnerable incumbents. In 1994, quality candidates were fielded for districts where the Democratic vote averaged over the two elections fell below 50% (Jacobson 1996). Because quality candidates are fielded for competitive districts (those where the opposing party's average vote is below 50%), non-quality candidates (who will not risk running against a same-party challenger of higher quality) end up running in districts that are seemingly non-competitive. In other words, non-quality candidates will run in districts where the opposing party's average vote percentage is 50% or greater. In wave years, more so than normal years, non-quality candidates pull out surprising wins in these districts due to favorable national conditions. When up for reelection, however, non-quality challengers may be running in a district that typically leans toward the opposing party, increasing their likelihood of losing.

Another factor that contributes to the opposing party's comeback is the fact that non-quality representatives lack prior political experience to draw upon in a subsequent race. If an inexperienced incumbent performs poorly in Washington or gets out of touch with his or her constituents, his or her reelection prospects can be damaged. What is more, a non-quality freshman may lose reelection due to lack of campaign experience. For non-quality candidates with little prior experience and (possibly) lower name recognition, there is little room for error in waging a reelection campaign.

A final factor in the loss of seats for the wave party is that wave years may result in the election of many candidates whose ideological positions put them further to the left or right than most other members of Congress. An examination of the 1994 election shows that Republican freshman were significantly more conservative than veteran Republicans (Born 146). Perhaps that is why only 83% of the Republican freshman class of 1994 was reelected in 1996, compared to the national average reelection rate in Congress of 95%.<sup>4</sup> Thus far, there has been little research done on the importance of ideology as an explanation for the success of opposition parties following wave elections.

In the analysis that follows, I consider three important questions: first, do wave elections result in an increased number of non-quality elected representatives? Second, are non-quality

---

<sup>3</sup> An example of this is Bill Frist, a 1994 Republican with no political experience who challenged three time incumbent Jim Sasser. Sasser was viewed as a "safe" incumbent but Frist ended up winning the election.

<sup>4</sup> For a wave election class, the fact that 83% of them were reelected was impressive. Indeed, the freshmen of 1994 have been viewed as very successful in their reelection efforts. According to Born, the Republican freshmen succeeded by distancing themselves from unpopular House Speaker Newt Gingrich and localizing their elections.

candidates more ideologically extreme than their quality counterparts? And third, how do candidate quality, candidate ideology, and district partisanship contribute to the comeback of the losing party in a wave-year election?

### **Research Design**

The first part of my study examines the trends of candidate quality in wave elections. Based on the existing literature, wave elections are caused by heightened national conditions which draw an increased number of quality challengers to run for office, compounding the effect of the wave. Quality candidates tend to do well in comparison to their non-quality counterparts because they have previous experience that provides them with name recognition, fundraising advantages, and pre-existing political connections and support.

In wave elections, a greater number of quality candidates emerge for the favored party than in normal years. In 1994, the quality of candidates running in open districts was significantly higher than in incumbent-held districts. Interestingly, Democrats fielded a greater number of quality candidates in open seat districts than Republicans did in 1994. This is consistent with strategic politician theory in that the high quality Democrats ran for open seats while but avoided running against incumbents in a wave year that was breaking against their party. In challenger races, Republicans were more successful at recruiting high-quality candidates. Again, this is consistent with strategic politician theory, which predicts that the favored party will recruit more quality challengers. In the first part of my analysis, I examine whether this same pattern of quality candidate recruitment held true in the wave election of 2006.

The second part of my study examines what effect the Democratic wave of 2006 had on the Republican comeback in 2010. Specifically, did candidate quality or ideology of Democratic freshman elected in 2006 have a significant impact on their reelection in 2008 and 2010? Because the 2006 election resulted in a wave of new Democrats, it is expected that more non-quality candidates were elected than in normal years. These non-quality candidates lack political experience and have fewer political ties which result in their demise in subsequent elections. In 2010, when national conditions favored Republicans, Democratic incumbents who had been non-quality candidates previously appeared vulnerable due to their lack of experience and therefore attracted quality Republican challengers which in turn increased their likelihood of losing. In the second part of my analysis, I examine whether non-quality candidates first elected in 2006 were more likely to lose in 2008 and 2010 than high-quality candidates from the same year.

In 1994, the Republican freshmen were more ideologically extreme than senior representatives from the same party. Is ideological extremity of freshmen true for all wave elections, and does it have a significant impact on the other party's comeback in later elections? Because the electorate is very moderate compared to the parties, there seems to be a constant pull to moderation when one party holds significantly more power than the other (when there is unified government), or when the dominant party's views slide overwhelmingly to the left or right. Evidence that supports this assertion comes from wave years themselves, which result mainly from the electorate's dissatisfaction with the party in power.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, while it has been shown that incumbents have more leeway to distance themselves ideologically from their constituents due to valence advantage, there also appears to be an electoral penalty associated with ideological extremism (Simas and Stone 2007). Therefore, a relatively large difference between the incumbents' partisanship score and the district's partisanship score should result in failure to win reelection. In short, wave years should result in a freshman class that is highly polarized relative to normal years, which adds to the opposing party's success in subsequent elections.

---

<sup>5</sup> Whether this dissatisfaction is an assessment of the incumbent-party's ideology or of the incumbent-party's failure to implement effective legislation is another discussion.

My hypotheses are as follows:

*Hypothesis 1.*

Candidates who run in open districts in 2006 will have higher quality scores than challengers.

*Hypothesis 2.*

Republicans running in open districts in 2006 will have higher quality scores than Democrats running in open districts.

*Hypothesis 3.*

Democratic challengers in 2006 will have higher quality scores than Republican challengers.

*Hypothesis 4.*

Quality Democratic candidates elected for the first time in 2006 will have a higher rate of electoral success in the 2008 and 2010 elections than “non-quality” Democratic candidates from the same election year.

*Hypothesis 5.*

More ideologically extreme Democratic candidates who were elected for the first time in 2006 will have a lower rate of electoral success in the 2008 and 2010 elections than other Democrats from their class who hold ideological views closer to the mainstream of their party.

To measure candidate quality I use the model developed by Krasno and Green in 1988. This model relies on the notion that previously holding political office is the most important factor in determining candidate quality (Bond et al 1985; Green and Krasno 1988; Jacobson and Kernell 1981). On a 9-point scale, candidates that have held elected political office receive a baseline score of 4 quality points; those with who have previously held no political office receive a baseline score of 0 points. Candidates with prior political experience can increase their quality by the type of office held previously (+1), if he or she is currently in office (+1), if a previous congressional run has been made (+1), and by having celebrity status (+1). For candidates who have held no previous political office, quality is increased for those who have been a previous candidate for political office (+1); previous congressional run (+1); have held nonselective office (+1); the type of nonselective office held (+1); party connections/political aide (+1); professional status (+1); and celebrity status (+1). This analysis will use the 0-8 scale as an interval measure of quality. Democratic challengers and open seat candidates from 2006 should have overall higher quality scores than their Republican counterparts.

To measure the effects of candidate quality and ideology on reelection of wave year freshman, I use a bivariate regression analysis that controls for party and district competitiveness. Ideology in this regression is based on DW-nominate scores, which range from -1 (most liberal) to +1 (most conservative).

## **Results**

Wave elections occur when national conditions overwhelming favor one party. Under Jacobson and Kernell’s strategic politician theory, when national factors favor a party, that party recruits high quality candidates who bring with them funding support and highly visible campaigns. In other words, candidates respond to national issues, and voters respond to candidates and their

campaigns. As the cycle gains momentum throughout the campaign season, the favored party gains seats.

Table 1 presents candidate quality scores for Republican and Democratic open seat candidates in 2006. As was the case for Republicans in 1994, Democrats in 2006 were slightly less experienced than their opponents. Because this year was obviously going to be a big year for Democrats, quality Republican candidates avoided incumbent-held districts and ran for open seats. Quality Democrats on the other hand were not afraid to challenge a vulnerable incumbent. This explains why Democrats running for open districts had lower scores than their Republican counterparts and why Democrats running in incumbent districts had higher scores than their Republican counterparts. Furthermore, all 16 of the seats previously held by Democrats were won by Democrats and only the highest quality Republicans won in seats held by their own party. While Democrats did win 3 Republican seats in 1994, the trends concerning candidate quality for open seat contests in 2006 coincide closely with 1994.

Table 2 presents quality scores for challengers from both parties as well as a breakdown of Democratic winners and losers. Notice that overall quality scores for Democrats were significantly higher than scores for Republicans. More importantly, quality scores for the 23 Democratic winners in incumbent-held districts was 4.39, which is slightly higher than scores for Democrats who won in open districts previously held by a Republican (4.33). Clearly, national conditions prompted quality Democratic candidates not only to run for open seats but also to challenge incumbents, despite the numerous advantages that incumbents possess.

To get an overall picture for candidate quality trends I compare my study from the 2006 midterm to Krasno and Green's findings on elections of 1972-1980, and Jacobson's findings on the 1994 election. From the four midterm elections studied, overall, Democrats fielded slightly higher quality challengers than Republicans. However, it seems that over the last three decades Republicans have been able to close the gap in quality. In the wave years of 1974, 1994, and 2006, a significant contrast in candidate quality exists between parties; obviously with the party favored by national conditions fielding higher quality challengers. In fact, quality scores for both parties in 2006 were significantly higher than in previous years. This may in part be the result of various causes such as an increase in career politicians or a greater number of people with professional status seeking elective office. The 2006 challenger quality scores are skewed however due to the lack of biographical data on 22 challengers. Because lack of data coincides strongly with non-quality candidates, we can assume that the true mean score of candidate quality for 2006 challengers is lower than derived.<sup>6</sup>

The "strategic politician theory" appears to be a very viable explanation for candidate quality. When national conditions are right, quality candidates are more likely to run. Candidates who run in open districts are of higher quality than their colleagues who run in incumbent-held districts. Yet the party out of favor fields higher quality candidates to run in open seats (due to high selectivity) while the favored party fields higher quality challengers. Finally, wave years result in a high turnover of seats, some to quality candidates and some to non-quality candidates. Concerning the second part of this study, in 1994, the favored Republican Party's freshman class was more ideological extreme than their veteran counterparts. Was this true for Democrats in 2006? What effects, if any, do candidate quality and ideology have on reelection success for members of Congress?

---

<sup>6</sup> Mean quality scores in 2006 were 3.19 for Democrats and 2.84 for Republicans.



Table 1. Candidate quality in open districts, 2006

Quality Score	All open seats				Seats previously held by Democrats				Seats previously held by Republicans					
	Republicans	Democrats	Republican Winners	Democratic Losers	Democratic Winners	Republican Losers	Republican Winners	Democratic Losers	Democratic Winners	Republican Losers	Republican Winners	Democratic Losers	Democratic Winners	Republican Losers
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	7	0	0	0	13	0	0	0	29	0	0	0	0	0
2	3	14	0	23	6	6	0	0	14	0	0	25	11	0
3	14	28	8	39	19	19	0	0	14	8	42	33	22	22
4	3	0	0	39	0	6	0	0	0	0	33	0	11	11
5	10	24	0	0	13	19	0	0	14	0	0	22	22	22
6	45	21	62	0	38	31	0	0	43	14	62	0	33	44
7	17	14	31	0	25	6	0	0	57	14	31	0	0	0
Total	99	101	101	101	101	100	0	0	100	99	101	100	99	99
N	29	29	13	13	16	16	0	0	7	7	13	13	9	9
Mean	5.10	4.52	6.08	3.54	5.31	4.31	0	0	6.57	3.57	6.08	3.42	4.33	4.89

Notes: cells are in percentages. Columns do not always add up to 100% due to independent rounding.  
 Sources: Library of Congress, database of campaign websites; Martha Angle and Jackie Koszczuk, *Politics in America 2008* (Washington DC, Congressional Quarterly Press, 2007); Michael Barone and Richard E. Cohen, *Almanac of American Politics 2008* (Washington DC, National Journal Group, 2007).

Table 2. Challenger Quality in Incumbent-Held Districts, 2006

Quality Score	All challengers		Democratic challengers only	
	Democrats	Republicans	Winners	Losers
0	0	0	0	0
1	14	21	0	16
2	29	32	17	30
3	18	18	26	17
4	19	11	13	20
5	8	10	0	9
6	10	9	30	7
7	3	0	13	2
Total	101	101	99	101
N	186	136	23	163
Mean	3.19	2.84	4.39	3.02

Notes: Cells are in percentages. Columns do not always add up to 100% due to independent rounding. Due to lack of biographical information 22 challengers were exempt from this collection.

Sources: Library of Congress, database of campaign websites; Martha Angle and Jackie Koszczuk, *Politics in America 2008* (Washington DC, Congressional Quarterly Press, 2007); Michael Barone and Richard E. Cohen, *Almanac of American Politics 2008* (Washington DC, National Journal Group, 2007).

Table 3. Impact of Quality and Ideology for Freshman Members of the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress in 2008 Election (Normal Year)

	B	Sig.	Odds Ratio
Party of Candidate (Republican)	-4.394 (2.379)	.065*	.012
Quality Score of Candidate	-.181 (.371)	.625	.834
Ideology Score of Candidate	.005 (.003)	.119	1.005
District Safety Score of Candidate	.122 (.087)	.200	1.118
Constant	3.070 (2.117)	.147	21.544
Cox-Snell R <sup>2</sup>		.137	
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>		.278	

Dependent Variable: Win in 2010; Standard errors in parentheses; \*p<.10; \*\*p<.05; \*\*\*p<.01; N=50;

Table 3 shows the impact of candidate quality and ideology on reelection rates for Democratic freshman elected in 2006. Previously, I said that candidate quality and ideology should not have a significant effect in 2008, since this election was a normal year.<sup>7</sup> And indeed, neither the quality of the candidate nor his/her ideology made a difference in whether he or she won or lost in 2008. Partisanship of the district was controlled for by our district competitiveness score, which did not have a significant impact either.

Table 4 shows the significance of quality and ideology in 2010 bids for reelection. I predicted candidate quality and ideology would have a significant impact in this election since it was a wave year for the Republican Party. Still, neither candidate quality nor ideology had any significant impact. District competitiveness was not the cause of the wave either. Why is this case? Let's first examine candidate quality. The largest factor in Krasno and Green's score of candidate quality is previous political experience. Since the Democratic freshmen were the current holders of high elective office when they ran in 2008 and 2010, their quality scores from 2006 were nullified. This fact combined with the various advantages of incumbency explains why quality scores did not have an impact in their success of reelection. In fact, 37% of Democrats classified as quality candidates in 2006 and 40% classified as non-quality lost reelection in 2010. Clearly, quality scores given at the time of their initial election do not holdover into future contests. Lack of political experience is not the cause of the Republican comeback in 2010.

Table 4. Impact of Quality and Ideology for Freshman Members of the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress in 2010 Election (Wave Year)

	B	Sig.	Odds Ratio
Party of Candidate (Republican)	.330 (1.369)	.810	1.391
Quality Score of Candidate	-.110 (.215)	.611	.896
Ideology Score of Candidate	.004 (.003)	.125	1.004
District Safety Score of Candidate	.089 (.058)	.126	1.093
Constant	-.530 (1.214)	.663	.589
Cox-Snell R <sup>2</sup>		.274	
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>		.378	

Dependent Variable: Win in 2010; Standard errors in parenthesis; \*p<.10; \*\*p<.05; \*\*\*p<.01; N=46

Ideology was not a significant cause of the 2010 Republican comeback. While freshman Republicans in 1994 were ideologically more extreme than veteran Republicans, freshman Democrats of 2006 were ideologically *less* extreme than veteran Democrats. DW-nominate scores for the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress show that the average score for freshmen Democrats is -.029 while for veterans it is -.41. On the other hand, Republican freshman scored .50, which is nearly identical to their veteran colleagues who scored .51. This explains why ideology was not a significant cause of the 2010 election outcome. Democratic freshman were more conservative than their veteran counterparts which was probably caused by their need to match the partisanship of their

<sup>7</sup> In this year Democrats picked up another 21 seats in the House.

districts (59% of Democratic freshman elected in 2006 won in moderate to conservative districts). In short, the 2010 election was not caused by Democrats elected in 2006 as far as candidate quality and ideology is concerned. Rather, the Republican comeback was fueled by national conditions. President Obama's approval score hovered around 44% (his lowest on record) in the weeks leading up to the election; unemployment was still close to 10% and the economy was in disarray. Furthermore, Republicans highlighted unpopular reforms like the healthcare bill and TARP to gain even more support for their cause. The electorate either swung to the right out of frustration for the ruling party or because of its desire to balance ideology on Capitol Hill. Either way, national conditions, or the fact that Republicans capitalized on them, seem to be the major cause of the Republican comeback in 2010.

### **Discussion**

This study examines the causes of wave elections and what they mean for future elections in regards to overall party performance. Analysis of the 2006 Democratic freshman affirms the strategic politician theory, and highlights how national conditions can greatly influence the quality of candidates that emerge for both parties. This study also shows that candidate quality, ideology, and district competitiveness do not have a significant impact on reelection rates of wave year freshmen. While candidate quality was not predicted to have any significant effect on reelection, ideology and district competitiveness were expected to be significant. My analysis proves otherwise. In sum, 2006 Democratic freshman did not directly plant the seeds for the Republican comeback in 2010. At least if they did, quality, ideology, and district competitiveness did not influence this outcome. These findings prove that ideological extreme candidates, candidates with little political experience, and competitive districts do not substantially cause a resurgence of the opposing party in subsequent elections. Instead, surge and decline is attributed to national conditions and the effects this has on candidate emergence.

Political scientists provide vast amounts of literature on candidate quality, reelection, and individual elections like 1994, but there is little literature on wave elections as a whole. This paper contributes to the literature because it shows how candidate quality, ideology, national and local conditions, and the incumbency effect are related in the setting of midterm Congressional elections. Furthermore, it presents a unique question and hypothesis that expands on the literature and attempts to explain the up and down trend of party performance in Congressional elections.

Studies that examine the causes of election outcomes and trends are always subject to error and question. This study analyzes reelection rates of wave year freshmen in a subsequent normal year and an opposing party wave year. A limitation exists due to the difficulty in controlling for various factors such as retirement, scandal, redistricting, and permanent partisan shifts in the electorate. Furthermore, since I only examine the reelection success of one freshman class my sample size is small. Examining the reelection success of a handful of freshman classes would be far more beneficial to finding the overarching trends of seat turnover.

Despite various limitations, this study tells us a great deal about midterm wave elections. First, it upholds the trends of candidate quality and strategic politician's theory in midterm elections. It also shows us that national conditions, not ideology or quality of the candidate, are the main causes of midterm wave elections.

### **References**

Abramowitz, Alan I. 1985. "Economic Conditions, Presidential Popularity, and Voting Behavior in Midterm Congressional Elections." *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 47, No. 1, pp 31-43.

Angle Martha and Jackie Koszczuk, 2007. Politics in America 2008. Congressional Quarterly Press, Washington DC.

Banks, Jeffrey S., and D. Roderick Kiewiet. 1989. "Explaining Patterns of Candidate Competition in Congressional Elections." *American Journal of Political Science*. Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 997-1015.

Bond, Jon R. and Cary Covington, and Richard Fleisher. 1985. "Explaining Challenger Quality in Congressional Elections." *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 47, No. 2, pp. 510-529.

Born, Richard. 2004. "Freshman Republicans and the 1996 Election: the Influence of Congressional Seniority on Voting for the House." *American Politics Research*, Vol. 32, No. 2, pp. 142-169.

Barone, Michael and Richard E. Cohen, 2007. Almanac of American Politics 2008. National Journal Group, Washington DC.

Brown, Adam R., and Gary C. Jacobson. 2008. "Party, Performance, and Strategic Politicians: The Dynamics of Elections for Senator and Governor in 2006." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 8, no. 4: 384-409.

Buchanan, Stan and Carl Klarner. 2006. "Forecasting the 2006 Elections for the United States Senate." *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 39, pp 849-855.

Burden, Barry C. and Amber Wichowsky. "Local and National Forces in Congressional Elections." University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Campbell, James. 1997. "The Presidential Pulse and the 1994 Midterm Congressional Election." *The Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 59, No. 3, pp. 830-857.

Fox, Richard L. and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2005. It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Jacobson, Gary C., and Samuel Kernell. 1981. Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections. Vail-Ballou Press, Binghamton.

Jacobson, Gary C. 1989. "Strategic Politicians and the Dynamics of U.S. House Elections, 1946-86." *American Political Science Review*, 83, 773-793.

Jacobson, Gary C. 1996. The 1994 House Elections in Perspective. *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 111, No. 2, pp. 203-233.

Krasno, Jonathan S. and Donald Philip Green. 1988. "Preempting Quality Challengers in House Elections." *Journal of Politics*. Vol. 50, No. 4, pp. 920 - 935.

Lazarus, Jeffrey. 2008. "Incumbent Vulnerability and Challenger Entry in Statewide Elections." *American Politics Research* 36.1, pp. 108-129.

Marsh, Michael, and Kenneth Benoit. 2008. "The Campaign Value of Incumbency: A New

Solution to the Puzzles of Less Effective Incumbent Spending." *American Journal of Political Science* 52.4, pp. 874-90.

Owens, John E. 1998. "The Importance of Candidate Characteristics and Local Political Conditions in the 1994 Midterm Elections." *Political Studies*, XLVI, 766-776.

Ragsdale, Lyn. 1981. "Incumbent Popularity, Challenger Invisibility, and Congressional Voters." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 201-218.

Simas, Elizabeth N. and Walter J. Stone. 2007. "Candidate Valence and Ideological Positioning in the 2006 House Elections." Paper presented at the 2007 Annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, USA.

Streb, Matthew. 2008. Rethinking American Electoral Democracy (Controversies in Electoral Democracy and Representation). New York: Routledge.

Victor, Kirk. 2010. "Midterm Strategies." *National Journal*: 14.

