

APGoPo Unit 5

WHY DO INCUMBENTS WIN?

During the last 50 years, incumbency has been the single most important factor in determining the outcome of congressional elections. Over 90% of House incumbents seeking reelection win. Over 75% of Senate incumbents seeking reelection win. Why?

Relatively few seats are seriously contested. Most are what are termed "safe seats." This leads to the public perception of a "permanent Congress." The counter to the "permanent Congress" argument is that reelection rates take into account only those incumbents who run for reelection. Retirements open up quite a few seats each year to new members.

ADVANTAGES OF INCUMBENCY

MONEY

- Incumbents are usually able to raise more campaign contributions than their challengers
- PACs contribute more money to incumbents than to their challengers
- Incumbents outspend challengers by a ratio of more than 2 to 1

NAME RECOGNITION

- Incumbents are usually better known to voters than are their challengers
- Incumbents have opportunities to participate in highly visible activities that are covered by local newspapers and local television stations

CONSTITUENT SERVICE

- There is a close link between constituent service and reelection
- Members of Congress are able to win supporters by performing casework for their constituents
 - Casework consists of helping individual constituents, often by cutting through bureaucratic red tape
- Members of Congress are able to win supporters by bringing home money and jobs ("pork") for their district
 - Pork is legislation that allows representatives to bring money and jobs to their district
 - Incumbents often sit on committees that enable them to earmark or designate specific projects for their district
 - Pork helps representatives earn a reputation for service to their district

THE FRANKING PRIVILEGE

- The franking privilege refers to the right of members of Congress to mail newsletters to their constituents at the government's expense
- In recent years, members of Congress have extended the franking privilege to include e-mails and recorded phone calls

GERRYMANDERING

- Members of the House often represent districts that have been deliberately gerrymandered to include voting blocs that support incumbents
- Gerrymandered districts discourage strong challengers from trying to compete with incumbents

CONSEQUENCES OF THE INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGE

- Consequences can be either positive or negative
 - Congress contains a large number of experienced leaders, thus enabling it to maintain continuity of leadership and policy
 - The continuity discourages radical change while encouraging close relations with interest groups
 - Because incumbents benefit the most from existing campaign finance laws, they have no incentive to reform them
 - Congress has more experienced political leaders
 - Discourages challengers
 - Policy specialization
 - Fewer women and minorities