STRATEGIC OKLAHOMA POLITICIANS: ANALYSIS OF THE OKLAHOMA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JOSEPH T. VAN NESS
Oral Roberts University

In this study, Oklahoma House of Representatives races from 1974-1988 are examined to the conclusion that attorneys and previous officeholders are the two best employment categories from which to stage successful challenges to an incumbent or election to an open seat. Additionally, although open seats are more easily obtained than when an incumbent is present, parity can be approached by a minority party over time by adhering to the suggested electability model. If the public mood is changing in the 90's, the implications of the model could become even more significant.

As a one-party dominant Democratic state, Oklahoma is not markedly different from other Southern states. The state legislature is dominated by Democrats who seem to continue in office, often unchallenged, for as long as they choose. The attitude seems to be that incumbents cannot be defeated, therefore, why challenge them? The traditional political culture of the state further encourages waiting one's turn rather than challenging political, social and economic elites (Darcy, 1983; Darcy, Brewer, and Clay, 1984).

As a result, the potential candidates appear to act strategically, waiting for an incumbent to die, retire or move on before running themselves. This pattern varies considerably from that found in some other areas of the country, such as California, Texas, and Florida where fierce challenges to incumbents are the rule.

It is the purpose of this research to examine the consequences of strategic candidacies in Oklahoma. This examination will be organized around three questions about candidates for the Oklahoma State House of Representatives from 1974 to 1988. 1) Who runs? 2) Who wins? 3) When do winners run? The sources of the data are the *Daily Oklahoman* and the *Directory of Oklahoma*, an annual publication of the State of Oklahoma. The *Daily Oklahoman* publishes lists of candidates who have filed for office and includes their occupation, age, and party.

Directory of Oklahoma, incumbency, whether or not there was a primary, runoff, or general election, and who won can be learned. This information is the basis for examining a strategic candidate model. Briefly, according to this model, the strategic candidate would be part of the traditional establishment, an attorney or previous officeholder, for example, who avoids running against an incumbent. The sacrificial lamb, in contrast, is an outsider with little status, indifferent to the ruling norms, who runs independently regardless of whether there is an incumbent.

THE STRATEGIC CANDIDATE MODEL

Numerous modern researchers have contributed immensely to the scholarly understanding of legislative candidate behavior. James David Barber has taken a psychological approach. Barber sees the very success that is necessary for the potential candidate to decide to run, to be a deterrent factor in running. Barber notes that, "The greater [the candidate's] achievements in business or the law, the more likely it is that these [financial and career] calculations will work to the disadvantage of legislative recruitment" (Barber, 1965:7-8). People who are most able, from a financial perspective to run, are least likely to do so, he argues, because of the high cost in time and money.

According to Barber, in addition to financial considerations, prospective candidates must occupy flexible occupations, be able to delegate time-consuming responsibilities to others, or have understanding superiors. Therefore, certain financial and occupational groups should be better represented among candidates than others.

Joseph A. Schlesinger, however, has presented an ambition theory which focuses on the way in which people cooperate, form organizations, coalitions, or factions to serve their political ends (Schlesinger, 1966). The potential candidate engages in political behavior and makes strategic decisions which are appropriate to being elected. Schlesinger found that only certain individuals were even in a position to aspire to become officeholders. According to this basic assumption, there is order and predictability to the process of advancement into political office. Combining aspects of these two models, we expect candidates who were from certain occupations to act rationally and make more calculated

36

decisions about when and when not to run.

More recently, Jacobson and Kernell have looked at U.S. Congressional elections and found predictability among ambitious political office seekers. They make the assumption that politicians are not fools. Therefore, whether or not a quality candidate decides to run is not random (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981:424). Instead, high quality candidates (lawyers and previous officeholders) act strategically and run only when the chances of winning are good.

Policy and representational implications are notable. If states such as Oklahoma have incumbents who are only challenged occasionally, if at all, their conduct in office might also vary from that of legislators in more competitive states. It is entirely possible that one effect of the high rate of unchallenged incumbents is on public policy.

WHO RUNS FOR THE OKLAHOMA HOUSE?

Races in Oklahoma's 101 House of Representatives districts were examined between 1974 to 1988. In the 808 elections, there were 662 races with incumbents present and those incumbents represented 36.3% of all 1,826 candidates. The typical race involved one Democratic incumbent and slightly less than two opponents. Usually, only one party was involved in a primary. The majority of all candidates, 70.0%, filed for office as Democrats, while 29.2% were Republicans and 0.8% were independents. The median candidate was 43 years of age, younger than was found by Schlesinger for first time officeholders. He found that over half were from 45 to 55 years of age (Schlesinger, 1966:184).

Of the 1,826 total candidates, 8.5% were women. Previous research indicates that women do not run as sacrificial lambs. Rather women select races more carefully. Women candidates in Oklahoma have more success in raising money than men, both in primaries and general elections. This indicates that more women are not elected to office only because there is a limited pool of potential women candidates (Darcy, 1983; Darcy, Brewer, and Clay, 1984).

A candidate's previous occupation gives insight into who runs for the Oklahoma House. The wide variation in candidate's employment has been reduced to six categories: blue collar worker, small businessman, professional, attorney, non-incumbent previous officeholder, and other.

The blue collar category includes such occupations as plumber, welder, or other manually skilled employee. Small business includes those individuals who own or work in individual local retail businesses. Professionals are individuals such as doctors, professors, or individuals whose job requires considerable higher education, but who are not attorneys. Attorneys are treated as a single category. Previous office-holders are individuals who are, or have been, in an elected office other than the one being contested. County sheriffs and county commissioners are examples. "Other" is a miscellaneous category which includes individuals not otherwise categorized including housewives, retired persons, and individuals who did not otherwise categorize themselves.

Small businessmen and professionals provide the largest groups of non-incumbent (new) candidates, which may indicate their freedom to delegate some of their business duties to employees or managers as predicted by Duncan MacRae (Barber, 1965:233; see Table 1). Non-incumbent attorneys had a moderate percentage of the total and non-incumbent previous office holders were only slightly represented. It may be speculated that the reason so few previous officeholders appear to run

TABLE 1

**Background on Non-Incumbent Lower House Candidates
by Type of Race (1974-1988)**

	No Incumbent Running	Incumbent Running	All	(N)
Blue Collar	7.8%	9.5%	8.7%	(102)
Other	10.2%	14.0%	12.2%	(142)
Small Business	33.2%	30.8%	31.9%	(371)
Professional	34.7%	33.4%	34.0%	(396)
Previous Officeholder	1.5%	1.5%	1.5%	(17)
Attorney	12.6%	10.9%	11.7%	(136)
Total (N)	100.0(524)	100.0%(640)	100.0%	(1164)

NOTE: While categories are not mutually exclusive, candidates are assigned into only one category.

SOURCE: Author's calculations from data published in the *Daily Oklahoman* and in the *Directory of Oklahoma* for the various years.

is that their previous occupation rather than previous office is being reflected in the data. Regarding race selection by non-incumbents, blue collar and "other" categories make up larger portions of those running against incumbents than those running in open races. According to Table 1, these outsiders tend to behave more often as "sacrificial lambs" than the more established types.

WHO WINS?

Regardless of their strategies, or lack thereof, some types of candidates should be more likely to win than others. For example, most new candidates lose. Of the 1,164 non-incumbent candidates, 207 (17.8%) won and 957 (82.2%) lost. The chances of losing varies considerably by occupation, however (see Table 2). Attorneys (24.3%) and previous office holders (23.5%) have the greatest probability of winning an election as new candidates while blue collar workers (3.9%) have the least.

Table 3 examines the outcome of races involving new candidates by whether or not an incumbent is in the race and new candidate background. Challengers win at an overall 9.7% rate, but it should be noted that in a race involving more than one challenger, whenever an

TABLE 2

Outcome of Race Involving New Candidate by the Candidate's Background (1974-1988)

	Elected	Loses	Total	(N)
Blue Collar	3.9%	96.1%	100.0%	(102)
Other	13.8%	86.2%	100.0%	(142)
Small Business	19.3%	81.7%	100.0%	(371)
Professional	20.2%	79.8%	100.0%	(396)
Previous				
Office Holder	23.5%	76.5%	100.0%	(17)
Attorney	24.3%	75.7%	100.0%	(136)
Total	17.8%	82.2%	100.0%	(1164)

NOTE: While categories are not mutually exclusive, candidates are assigned into only one category.

SOURCE: As with Table 1.

TABLE 3

Outcome of Race involving New Candidates by Whether or not an Incumbent is in the Race and New, and New Candidate Background

| | *Against Incumbent* | | | | *No Incumbent* | | | |
| | *New Candidate* | | | | *New Candidate* | | | |
	Wins	Loses	Total	*(N)*	Wins	Loses	Total	*(N)*
Blue Collar, Other Small Business and Professional	9.6%	90.4%	100.0%	(561)	25.8%	74.2%	100.0%	(450)
Previous Office	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%	(9)	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%	(8)
Attorney	11.4%	89.6%	100.0%	(70)	37.9%	62.1%	100.0%	(66)
Total	9.7%	90.3%	100.0%	(640)	27.7%	72.3%	100.0%	(524)

SOURCE: As with Table 1.

incumbent wins, all challengers are defeated. This is also true of individual categories. Therefore, attorneys who appear to win at the rate of 11.4% against incumbents are often running against other challengers, some of whom are attorneys.

The real power of attorney candidates can be seen in the open races. Attorneys are more likely to get elected than are other groups, even previous officeholders. Even the other categories are three times more likely to be elected in open seats than against incumbents.

If candidates do act strategically, then current House members are former strategic candidates who survive largely because they go unchallenged by other strategic candidates. Who, then, does defeat incumbents? According to the strategic candidate model, both non-incumbent attorneys and non-incumbent previous officeholders prefer to run in open races. The non-incumbent attorneys clearly performed better than their non-attorney counterparts, therefore, the attorneys make better candidates. The greater success of attorneys is, therefore, partly responsible for the relatively high percentage of attorneys in the Oklahoma House compared to their proportion of the population. But most House members are not attorneys or previous officeholders. Small business and professional categories (32.9% and 38.6% respectively) are most represented among winners because of the large number who run. Many are elected in spite of their mediocre election rates (see Table 4). Therefore, the number of house winners who come from lower status

TABLE 4

Composition of Winners and Losers among New Candidates (1974-1988)

	New Candidate Elected	New Candidate Loses
Blue Collar	3.9%	9.8%
Other	6.8%	13.4%
Small Business	32.9%	31.7%
Professional	38.6%	33.0%
Prev. Office Holder	1.9%	1.3%
Attorney	15.9%	10.8%
Total (N)	100.0% (207)	100.0% (957)

SOURCE: As with Table 1.

occupations are elected because there is a larger number of them who run compared to those with higher status occupations.

From the partisan perspective, Republican and Democratic non-incumbent candidates are roughly similar in backgrounds, although the Democrats outnumbered the Republicans 2 to 1.

Overall, Democrats acted slightly more strategically than Republicans by more often selecting an open race. According to Table 5, of all backgrounds, strategic race selection was most visible among Republican attorneys. Generally, attorneys are, as a profession, traditionally more familiar with politics.

Table 6 examines how party and background effect the chances of a new candidate getting elected. Since all independents were losers, this table reflects only the relative successes of background categories between the Republican and Democratic parties.

According to this analysis, Republican attorneys, again, are shown to be the background category with the highest winning percentage. Republican blue collar workers and previous officeholders performed the poorest. Even more striking is that, among new candidates, overall Republican success in winning legislative seats is 2.5 percentage points greater than for Democrats (19.7% vs 17.2%). The Democratic advantage in the legislature is due, in part, to the fact that there are twice as many new Democratic candidates as Republican.

For both parties, the bulk of new candidates elected come from small business and professional backgrounds. Their large numbers compen-

TABLE 5

Background of Non-Incumbent Lower House
by Party and Type of Race (1974-1988)

	Republicans			Democrats		
	No Inc Running	Inc Running	All	No Inc Running	Inc Running	All
Blue Collar	6.2%	9.8%	8.2%	8.1%	9.2%	8.7%
Other	12.5%	14.8%	13.9%	9.3%	13.7%	11.7%
Small Business	29.2%	32.6%	31.1%	35.1%	30.1%	32.4%
Professional	38.5%	32.6%	35.1%	33.1%	33.5%	33.3%
Previous Officeholder	0.6%	0.9%	0.8%	1.9%	1.7%	1.8%
Attorney	13.0%	9.3%	10.9%	12.5%	11.8%	12.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
(N)	(161)	(215)	(376)	(359)	(415)	(774)
	(42.8%)	(57.2%)	(100%)	(46.4%)	(53.6%)	(100%)

SOURCE: As with Table 1.

sate for their relatively poor chances of being elected. Attorneys and previous office holders, who have much better chances of being elected, are relatively poorly represented because so few of them run.

TABLE 6

Outcome of Race by Non-Incumbent Background and Party

	Republicans			Democrats		
	Non-Inc Elected	Non-Inc Loses	Total	Non-Inc Elected	Non-Inc Loses	Total
Blue Collar	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%	11.9%	88.1%	100.0%
Other	13.5%	86.5%	100.0%	7.8%	92.2%	100.0%
Small Business	22.2%	77.8%	100.0%	16.7%	83.3%	100.0%
Professional	21.2%	78.8%	100.0%	20.2%	79.8%	100.0%
Previous Officeholder	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%	28.6%	71.4%	100.0%
Attorney	31.7%	68.3%	100.0%	21.3%	78.7%	100.0%
Total	19.7%	80.3%	100.0%	17.2%	82.8%	100.0%
(N)	(74)	(302)	(376)	(359)	(133)	(774)

SOURCE: As with Table 1.

TABLE 7

Composition of Winner and Loser Categories among
Non-Incumbents by Party (1974-1988)

| | Republican | | | Democrat | | |
| | New Candidate | | | New Candidate | | |
	Elected	Loses		Elected	Loses	
Blue Collar	0.0%	10.3%		6.0%	9.2%	
Other	9.5%	14.9%		5.3%	12.9%	
Small Business	35.1%	30.1%		31.6%	32.6%	
Professional	37.8%	34.4%		39.1%	32.1%	
Previous Officeholder	0.0%	1.0%		3.0%	1.6%	
Attorney	17.6%	9.3%		15.0%	11.6%	
Total	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%	100.0%	
(N)	(161)	(215)	(376)	(359)	(415)	(774)

SOURCE: As with Table 1.

INCUMBENTS

Legislative races can also be examined from the perspective of the incumbent. When one or more challengers were present, incumbents won 85.6% of the time. They were defeated 14.4% of the time (Table 8).

However, the incumbent was challenged only 59% of the time. In the other 41% of the races, incumbents were re-elected by default boosting their overall election rate to 91.49% when defending their seat. Clearly, a great deal of the incumbent re-election rate success is due to opponents acting non-strategically, not waiting until the incumbent retires (Table 8). The implication is that non-incumbents should wait and act strategically before attempting to run for office.

APPLICATION

If an individual candidate follows the strategic model, the candidate's individual chances for election will improve. The party's chances of gains, whether it is in the majority or minority, will be limited by strategic action, however. Republican non-incumbents were found to

TABLE 8

Chances of an Incumbent Winning when Running for Re-election
by Whether or not There is an Opponent in the Race (1974-1988)

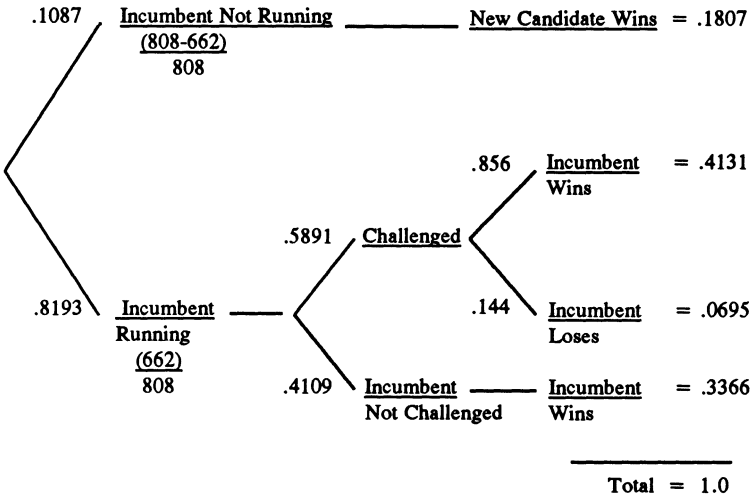| Challenger	Incumbent			
In Race	Wins	Loses	Total	(N)
Yes	85.6%	14.4%`	100.0%	(390)
No	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%	(272)
Total	91.4%	8.6%	100.0%	(662)

SOURCE: As with Table 1.

challenge incumbents at the rate of 57.2%, while Democrats do so at a rate of 53.6% (Table 5). From a party perspective, the Republicans are often running "sacrificial lambs" whose chances of winning are minor because they are acting less strategically. In order for the minority Republican party to achieve a greater gain of seats in the Oklahoma House, it is necessary to further break away from the traditional strategic methodology.

While attorneys and previous officeholders win more seats than candidates from other occupational categories, party seats will be gained by running greater numbers of candidates of all backgrounds against incumbents. It would be advantageous to either party to eliminate automatic wins that result from the lack of opposition. Because the rate of winning is less for the non-strategic candidates, the numbers of contested races must increase for party gains to occur.

We have established that incumbents will win re-election, when challenged, at a rate of 85.6%. They lose 14.4% of the time. If these findings are applied to an existing election model, it can be shown how majority and minority parties, by acting strategically, have restricted their chances of increasing seats in a legislative body. Using a tree diagram in a similar method as R. Darcy and J. Choike, the rates of success and failure of the 808 Oklahoma House elections can be graphically expressed (Darcy and Choike, 1989).

The data thus far developed on the Oklahoma House of Representatives from 1974-1988 are shown in Figure 1. Each electoral contingency is accounted for by individual percentages and representative numbers. According to this model, winning and unchallenged incumbents combined represent 75% of the legislature in each session. Since the unchal-

44

FIGURE 1
Model of Electoral Process Producing New Legislature


```
.1087    Incumbent Not Running _____ New Candidate Wins  = .1807
         (808-662)
            808
                                        .856    Incumbent    = .4131
                                                Wins
                           .5891  Challenged
.8193    Incumbent _____                .144  Incumbent    = .0695
         Running                               Loses
          (662)
           808        .4109  Incumbent _____ Incumbent    = .3366
                             Not Challenged    Wins

                                           Total  =  1.0
```
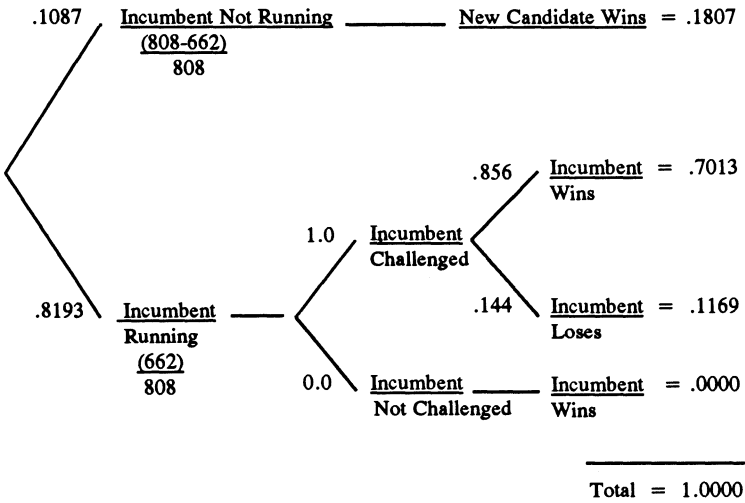
lenged incumbent who wins represents another 41.3%, the proportion of winners who are non-incumbents is 25%, which could be called the "House turn-over" rate.
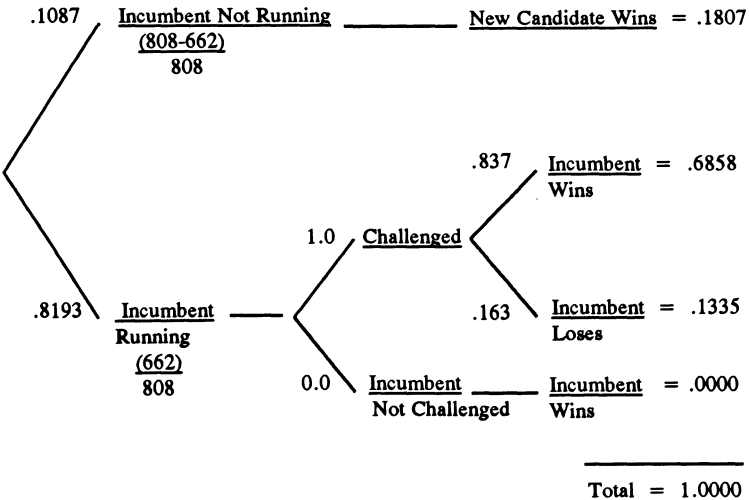
A hypothetical model of the electoral process producing a new legislature with idealized parameters would eliminate unchallenged incumbents (Figure 2). If the unchallenged incumbents were challenged at the established win rate of 14.4% for non-incumbents, new seats would have been gained (207 x 144 = 30) for an average of 3.75 new seats for each of the eight elections studied. This hypothetical model produces a 70% incumbent return rate, 5% less than the current real model.

A second hypothetical model could be constructed in which all incumbents are challenged and better challengers are present. This could be accomplished by recruiting more attorneys and previous office holders. The change would produce a 1.9% reduction in the rate of returning incumbents (Figure 3). Comparing the two strategies, challenging all incumbents with the existing mix of new candidates is twice as effective in defeating incumbents (5% increase) while upgrading new candidates produces the additional increase.

45

FIGURE 2
Hypothetical Model of Electoral Process Producing New Legislature with Idealized Parameters. . . All Incumbents Challenged

.1087 — Incumbent Not Running _____ New Candidate Wins = .1807
(808-662)
808

.856 — Incumbent Wins = .7013

1.0 — Incumbent Challenged

.8193 — Incumbent Running (662) 808

.144 — Incumbent Loses = .1169

0.0 — Incumbent Not Challenged — Incumbent Wins = .0000

Total = 1.0000

FIGURE 3
Hypothetical Model of Electoral Process with Idealized Parameters. . . All Incumbents Challenged and Better Challengers. (Challenger Increases Chances of Winning against Incumbent by 2%)

.1087 — Incumbent Not Running _____ New Candidate Wins = .1807
(808-662)
808

.837 — Incumbent Wins = .6858

1.0 — Challenged

.8193 — Incumbent Running (662) 808

.163 — Incumbent Loses = .1335

0.0 — Incumbent Not Challenged — Incumbent Wins = .0000

Total = 1.0000

CONCLUSION

Historically, legislators who have secure seats are less responsive to their constituencies than those facing hotly contested races. Therefore, incumbents who are challenged more often could not afford to become complacent. They would be forced to concentrate on developing records of legislative accomplishment with which to face their voters.

Oklahoma is a one-party Democratic state, primarily because the voters are often given no choice. In many districts the real election occurs in the primary. Because some voters who are ideologically aligned with the minority party are registered as members of the majority party, there is a tendency toward one party dominance. Therefore, by having more and better qualified challengers, greater democratization of Oklahoma or any other one-party Democratic or Republican state, would occur.

A related study is suggested by the renewed anti-incumbent mood promulgated by the recent U.S.House banking scandal and a public perception of legislative ineffectiveness, neither of which are validated in this study. From the conclusions of this present research, challengers should have even greater successes against incumbents impacted by these additional factors.

REFERENCES

Barber, James David. 1965. *The Lawmakers*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Black, Merle. 1976. Republican Party Development in the South: The Rise of the Contested Primary. *Social Sciences Quarterly* 57: 566-577.

Born, Richard. 1986. Strategic Politicians and Unresponsive Voters. *American Political Science Review* 80.

Darcy, R. and James Choike. 1991. Party Competition in an American One Party Dominant System: A Formal Analysis. *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 3: 213-229.

Darcy, R. 1983. Why So Few Women in Public Office? A Look at Oklahoma Politics. In *Southwest Cultural Heritage Festival 1982 Selected Faculty Papers,* edited by Gorden Weaver, 21-30. Stillwater: Oklahoma State University Press.

Darcy, R., Judy Clay and Margaret Brewer. 1984. Women in the Oklahoma Political Systems: State Legislative Elections. *The Social Science Journal* 21: 67-78.

Ethridge, Marcus E. 1982. Regulatory Policy Administration and Agency-Citizen Linkages in Southern States. *Contemporary Southern Political Attitudes and Behavior*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982.

Jacobson, Gary C., and Samuel Kernell. 1982. Strategy and Choice in 1982 Congressional Elections. *PS* 15: 423-430.

Key, V.0. *1949. Southern Politics in State and Nation.* New York: Knopf.

Marsh, Michael. 1987. Electoral Evaluations of Candidates in Irish General Elections 1948-1982. *Irish Political Studies* 2: 65-76.

Mann, Thomas E. 1978. *Unsafe at Any Margin.* Washington: American Enterprise Institute.

Schlesinger, Joseph A. 1966. *Ambition and Politics.* Chicago: Rand McNally & Company,