

CANDIDATE EMERGENCE AND THE POWER OF INCUMBENCY IN THE OKLAHOMA LEGISLATURE

JEFFREY BIRDSONG
Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College

This article explores why individuals decide to run for the Oklahoma legislature. Research on candidate emergence stresses the power incumbents have to dissuade the most formidable candidates, those who can raise the necessary funds to be competitive, from becoming candidates. Thus the strongest candidates usually wait for an open seat or a vulnerable incumbent before they choose to run for office. Challengers who do not consider the status of the incumbents when deciding on their candidacy are typically not the strongest candidates. Are these findings borne out by the Oklahoma experience? The participants for this study were potential candidates to the Oklahoma legislature for the 2000 election cycle. Also, some incumbents were interviewed to get their perspective on why they first decided to be candidates.

The decision to be a candidate for office is a process that is known as candidate emergence. In order to study why some individuals run for

office, a researcher should not only consider candidates who have formally announced and are in the process of running for office, but also identify individuals who are considering their candidacies. These particular individuals are referred to below as "potential" candidates. Candidate emergence involves the study of potential candidates and the thought process that goes into deciding a candidacy. This paper analyzes candidate emergence in the state of Oklahoma, focusing on potential candidates for the state legislature who decided to run or not to run for the 2000 election.

In candidate emergence, incumbency is a pivotal factor in the decisions of many candidates. For strong candidates, such as most incumbents, their victories are often decided before the election. Successful candidates can win before the campaign season begins by weakening the field of opponents. This philosophy of winning before the event itself goes back centuries, as the Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu thought that to be victorious in war, a general must take "measures designed to make it easy to win" (Griffith, 1963, 39). In the modern electoral competition, an incumbent may scare off opponents by essentially campaigning at all times, thus discouraging challengers. However, if incumbents are considered to be weak, then the most attractive challengers to a race decide to run early and decisively, which may cause fellow challengers and incumbents to pull out of the race or to stay in the race but with less support and enthusiasm. With regard to potential candidates for Congress, Thomas Kazee (1994), one of the leading scholars on candidate emergence, claimed that "decisions made well before the first campaign speech is given or the first advertising dollar is spent — shape the universe of winners" (p.4). My research applied the same reasoning used by Kazee, but at the state legislative level.

Candidate emergence research is methodologically challenging because emergence occurs before there are actual campaigns to cover or elections to review. It is a study of campaigns in the embryonic stage, by its nature a time of uncertainty. Nevertheless, it is at this stage when many winners already are decided. The difficulty in this research is the process of identifying potential candidates. Contacts with local political and community activists are necessary to find out who is considered a potential candidate for the state legislature. After the individuals have been identified, interviews are conducted with observations made during

the interview process. These procedures require time and information in order to build trust. As Linda Fowler and Robert McClure (1989) noted on their research of potential candidates for Congress, "The unseen candidates for Congress are not easily identifiable. They can be discovered only with a detailed understanding of the political life of a specific congressional district" (p.7). Thus, this research was primarily devoted to potential candidates from legislative districts in northeastern Oklahoma, where I could spend more time developing contacts and making observations.

It is through research in candidate emergence that the field of political science understands the personal motivations and the political strategies of those who choose to become politicians. Studies on candidate emergence mainly have focused on candidates for statewide or federal offices and have formed some generalized views on candidates. Most people who run for office are highly ambitious, well educated, and successful in other fields (Matthews, 1954). Also, candidates act strategically, which means that they choose their moments when to run for office. Stronger challengers may wait until incumbents either retire or are weakened politically by being entangled in scandals or have taken political stands that have alienated a large part of their constituency (Jacobson & Kernell, 1983).

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the best reviews on the chronological changes on theories of candidacy can be found in the Linda Fowler's (1993) *Candidates, Congress, and the American Democracy*. Fowler noted that no single theory had encompassed all aspects of candidacy. She also stated that no theory had completely refuted previous ones on candidate emergence, which indicates that all theories still have some relevance. Fowler broke down the theories into five traditions: sociological, psychological, process, goal, and rule.

The sociological tradition is based on the works of European sociologists Max Weber, Robert Michels, and Gaetano Mosca. This was the most accepted theory on candidacy from the turn of the 20th century to the post-World-War II era. According to Fowler, the sociological tradition created a deterministic and macrolevel theory of

elite behavior. The rules and behavior of the political elite were strictly defined according to class structure.

Compared with the sociological tradition, the psychological tradition signified a shift from group analysis to the analysis of individuals. This tradition was indicative of the behavioral movement in the social sciences from the 1930s to the 1950s. According to Fowler, the psychological tradition "examined the motivations behind political behavior and attempted to demonstrate how particular actions flow from certain personality traits" (p. 49). Candidates would have needs in their lives fulfilled by campaigning. The need for power is one of the leading motivations.

Beyond the notion of a single group in the sociological tradition and the study of individuals in the psychological tradition, the process tradition focused on the political competition among rival groups (Fowler, 1993). As Fowler stated, "the number of opportunities to run for office and the structure of party competition influenced the level of aspirations among officeholders" (p. 56). Based on this tradition, a researcher, when formulating questions on candidate emergence, would review the structure of local political parties, the strength of incumbents, the political positions from local media outlets, the activity of interest groups, and the political history of the geographic regions. The process tradition assumed that politically ambitious people would run for any elected office.

By the 1970s, the process tradition had been overshadowed by the belief that candidates were rational actors rather than merely ambitious individuals. Gordon Black and David Rohde were two of the primary political scientists who, Fowler wrote, viewed a candidacy as "a relatively straightforward calculation of costs and benefits discounted by the perceived probability of winning" (p. 60). The rational actor, or goal, tradition was very important to research on candidate emergence when considering the status of the incumbent. As two advocates of rational-choice note, "more and better candidates appear when signs are favorable; worse and fewer when they are unfavorable" (Jacobson & Kernell, 1983).

One final theory featured by Fowler was the rule-based theory. According to this theory, rational decision making about ambition was constrained by political institutions (p. 66). Pointing out the distinctions of rule-based theory, Jeffrey Banks and D. Roderick Kiewiet noted

that inexperienced challengers were less rational because they did not fit into the cost-benefit model of accounts for candidate emergence (Fowler, 1993). This theory is important to include in a study of candidate emergence at the state legislative level because more than likely, there will be candidates who do not have the support or association with their party and also candidates who decide to run at the last moment and put little calculation into their decisions.

Fowler's work has provided a broad review of the theories or traditions developed on why individuals run for office. Other research focuses specifically on candidate emergence in the state legislature. Francis and Baker (1986) found that the most dissatisfied members were those who felt legislative service was not very rewarding. For some of the younger incumbents who chose not to run, those in their early forties, a primary reason for leaving the legislature was to pursue another political office. Added to the lack of reward and higher political ambition were the opportunities foregone on a legislator's other occupation. For Francis and Baker, the incumbency strength is implied, as incumbents choose to leave as a result of personal dissatisfaction or higher ambition rather than forced to leave the legislature from their own vulnerabilities.

Cox and Morgenstern (1993) discovered that the incumbency advantage could be explained by increased legislative operating budgets and by increased casework. Cox and Kratz (1996) developed this theme at the national level by arguing that U.S. House incumbents could scare off quality challengers by utilizing the resources of their offices, such as their legislative staff and their franking privileges.

A common theme in this research is the power of incumbency. Incumbents continue to have an advantage over their challengers, and it is far more likely for incumbents to leave office rather than to be defeated. However, the demands of the office, which led to the dissatisfaction of some incumbents as suggested in Francis and Baker's (1986) research, may mean that incumbents must be in a continuous campaign mode in order to ward off strong challengers. In fact, Jeffrey Cohen (1984) found that incumbents felt insecure about their status even when they had very little threat in their districts. Ironically, this constant feeling of insecurity may actually help incumbents stay elected. An in-depth analysis on incumbency by Jewell and Breaux (1988) determined that in a twenty-year period, legislators consistently were reelected, with an over eighty-percent success rate in the fourteen states

they studied. They concluded that unless state parties maintained effective recruiting efforts, incumbents in most states grew in strength and discouraged political challengers from running.

In sum, there is strong evidence that most potential candidates judge the strength of the incumbent before deciding to run for office. This certainly makes sense if most challengers are indeed rational actors and decide to compete for office when their chances of success are greatest. Is this true of Oklahoma? The present study identified potential candidates for the state legislature of Oklahoma and asked them why they decided to be candidates.

METHODOLOGY

This study of why individuals run for the legislature entailed two steps. First, I contacted local political leaders in order to determine who were potential candidates. Local political leaders, usually county chairs, were asked questions regarding potential candidates: "Who is most likely to run?"; "Can you name anyone who would make a good candidate, but would probably *not* run?"; "Is anyone grooming himself or herself for a run in the future?"; "Who would you like to see run for the state legislature?" From these questions, I got the names of potential candidates in their counties and/or districts.

After identifying the potential candidates, I then arranged interviews. Using twenty legislative districts, I contacted forty potential candidates and interviewed thirty-nine, as one rejected my request for an interview. Some of these potential candidates were incumbents, some were declared candidates, some were still undecided about the current election cycle, and some were planning to run in the future. I was able to analyze candidate emergence from a variety of combinations: Republican incumbents and Democratic challengers, Democratic incumbents and Republican challengers, open seats, Republican uncontested seats, Democratic uncontested seats, rural districts, urban districts, and suburban districts. This diversity of cases gave my research considerable perspective on candidate emergence for the state legislature.

The interviews consisted of a semi-structured list of open-ended questions. Participants were asked about their party activity, their

involvement with interest groups, their fundraising abilities, and their past political experiences. For the research at hand, the most applicable question asked was "What are the circumstances that made you decide to run for the legislature this time?" If they had decided not to run, "What would it take to change your mind? What conditions would have to be present before you would seriously consider running for the state legislature?" The responses given by participants helped me understand the ultimate reasons for candidacy.

Since this research was a qualitative study, the use of words was the primary method for explaining the actions of individuals rather than numbers (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Focusing on words does not mean that qualitative research avoids collecting data. There was a collection process to my research, and it followed the features described by John Lofland (1971) in *Analyzing Social Settings*. Lofland wrote that the report from qualitative data must be truthful, a factual representation of what occurred, and that the research must also have a pure description of the people, areas, and events involved in a study (1971). Lofland also believed that good qualitative research would include direct quotes from the subjects of the study. Thus I have collected in their own words the reasons why potential candidates decide to run.

THE ULTIMATE DECISION FOR CANDIDACY

All individuals who have thoughts of running for office eventually reach a final turning point in their candidacies. Ambition has been portrayed as the overriding reason for candidacy in the House of Representatives (Fowler & McClure, 1989). One can argue that nearly all candidates must have a personal motivation that makes them want to run. However, based on the responses below, personal ambition was not the most frequent reason given for candidacy. It could be that most individuals would not want to reveal that much of their personality to a researcher. It also could be that the strength of the incumbent overwhelmed the personal ambition of candidates. Clearly, the status of the incumbent was on the mind of most participants. Table 1 is a review of the circumstances that made some individuals become candidates as well as the reasons that made others reject a chance at candidacy.

TABLE 1

Synopsis of Reasons for Candidacy

Incumbents	Why did you run? (first campaign)
Phil Ostrander	The incumbent was unresponsive to firefighter issues.
Rick Littlefield	The resignation of the incumbent made the district an open seat.
Larry Roberts	It was an open seat.
Joe Eddins	I thought we needed better representation.
Larry Adair	It was an open seat as a result of reapportionment and I thought I could make a difference.
Tad Jones	The incumbent stepped down and it was a good year to run. I would have run even against the incumbent in order to get name recognition.
Larry Rice	As a city councilman, I had an interest in the legislature. The legislature had a direct impact on the city. I ran because I thought I could do a better job than the incumbent.
Barbara Staggs	In 1994, I thought the timing was right because I thought the incumbent was going to retire (the incumbent, John Monks, did run again, but lost to Staggs in the primary).

TABLE 1 (continued)

Synopsis of Reasons for Candidacy

Challengers	Why did you run?
Lou Martin	The partisan bickering. Frank Keating will still be governor after the 2000 election and the GOP may have the majority.
Allen Harder	Bill Settle's (the incumbent at the time) decision to run for the 2 nd district congressional seat.
Shelby Satterfield	I just wasn't finished. I got beat last time in a non-presidential year (1998). More voters may turn out this time.
Joe Johnson	I've always wanted to do it. If Joe (Eddins, the incumbent) did not have his six years in, which locks in his retirement, then I would not have run.
Joe Peters	There is no change from the years that I've been gone from this area (roughly thirty-five years). Not a damn thing has changed because the legislature is too busy promoting itself.
Jim Wilson**	Governmental incompetence which has lost revenue for the state. We continue to lose jobs in this state. Also, having an open seat was important.
Ray Miller**	Representative Frame got a second DUI, in which rear-ended a car in Oklahoma City. Frame also got into a heated argument with GOP chairman Steve Edwards. Mike Mass, the Democratic Chairman, was concerned this seat could go Republican. I think this is an opportunity to make a difference and that is not some political BS.
Lela Foley Davis	It's an open seat.

TABLE 1 (continued)

Synopsis of Reasons for Candidacy

Challengers	Why did you run?
Wayne Ryals	For 3 reasons: 1) the legislation concerning education, 2) the legislation concerning the department of corrections, 3) health care at the state level.
Ed Brocksmith	Disappointment with the leadership of the incumbent on the protection of the Illinois River.
Russell Turner	The taxes in Oklahoma are too high. The legislature implements "user fees" instead of taxes, which is nothing more than "shell game politics."
Curt Working	An opportunity that I might make a difference.

SOURCE: Author's interviews.

TABLE 1 (continued)

Synopsis of Reasons for Candidacy

Challengers	Why did you run?
Liz Nottingham	My family is in good shape financially. There is no incumbent Democrat. Democratic registration outnumbers Republican registration in my district.
Stuart Ericson**	It's an open seat. I want to do it and I have people to help me. With an open seat I have a chance to win. I can get crossover Democrats to vote for me and this presidential election will help Republicans.
Albro Daniel	I wanted to get on the ballot. We needed to get some people to run. I'm sick of the two-party system (Daniel is a Libertarian).
John Smaligo**	The same desire to make the state a better place and the fact that I got so close in 1998.
Julian Coombs	An inner voice saying this is the time to run. It is the same feeling I had when I ran for the board of trustees.
Dal Newberry	My inner belief—my age (65) or work (minister) had nothing to do with it.

** Denotes challengers who were elected in 2000.

TABLE 1 (continued)

Synopsis of Reasons for Candidacy

Non-candidates	Why did you not run?
Carolyn Allen	Based on my previous candidacy, I did not think I would get support from the state Republican party.
Mark Mann	I did not think I would have a chance to win against the incumbent.
John Handshy	I did not have time to run this year.
Paul Landers	I did not believe that the Lord wanted me to do that this time (Mr. Landers ran previously based on his belief that God wanted him to be a candidate).
Michael Dill	My job is too demanding.
Doyle Seawright	Not enough Republicans in the county to get me elected.
Tex Slyman	It is not an open seat. If I could not defeat the incumbent last time, why could I win this time?
Don Childers	I am waiting for the incumbent to retire.
Keith Armstrong	I wanted to run, but there was no support from the local Republican party.
David Hampton	To run against the incumbent (Larry Adair) I would need to raise 100,000 dollars. Party officials have told me I would need to raise that amount or I could not win.
Anonymous	I need to build my law practice. I don't have anything else to fall back on.
Greg Gatz	The county election board put me in the wrong district.
Clark McQuigg	I did not want to take on an incumbent and also I did not want to leave my business in the lurch.

NOTE: See appendix A for interview schedule.

While Fowler and McClure (1989) emphasized the importance of individual ambition for those who become candidates, they concluded that the status of the incumbent often determined the number of candidates in a congressional race as well as the quality of candidates. Indeed, for this study most candidates for the legislature regarded the status of the incumbent as the most important reason for their candidacies. For the incumbents interviewed, all initially decided to run either because there was no incumbent, an open seat, or because the incumbent, in their view, was doing a poor job.

For the challengers, the status of the incumbent was a major reason, although other factors also were mentioned. In step with the features of the process tradition described by Fowler, the perceived strength of their political party also gave some challengers incentives to run. Some challengers considered the past election a good year for their party, and others viewed their district as conducive for their party. Only one challenger explained his candidacy in "party building" terms. Albro Daniel, the Libertarian, did approach his candidacy as a way to get his party recognition.

Some individuals who decided to run on what can only be described as a fulfillment for personal needs, a feature found in the psychological tradition of candidate emergence. Statements such as "My inner belief," "An inner voice saying this is the time to run," and "I've always wanted to do it," indicated a deep personal motivation on the part of the respondents. These statements also suggested that candidates who ran solely on personal desire might not be concerned or aware of the political environment surrounding them.

As found in Jewell's (1982) research that noted the absence of policy issues in legislative campaigns, very few challengers mentioned policy as a reason for candidacy. Also, few of the incumbents mentioned policy specifically as a reason for their first legislative bid.

While personal ambition can be the only explanation for candidacy among some of the challengers, it is evident from the majority of challengers and all incumbents interviewed that most understood the limitations of ambition. Along with ambition, the status of the incumbent, the perceived strength of party, and to a much lesser degree policy issues, must be taken into consideration before most individuals are willing to become candidates.

Statements made by those who decided against candidacy reflect the same reasons as those who did become candidates. Only for many of these individuals, the incumbent was too strong or their party was too weak. Most responses seemed to reflect either the process or rational actor traditions of candidate emergence. The reasoning of non-candidates gave evidence of some introspection. Based on their own experiences, many knew the difficulties of campaigning, while others recognized through their jobs or their own personal desires that the devotion needed for candidacy did not exist. Personal ambition may not always be the resolving factor for candidacy, but the statements made by those who decided against candidacy remind us that it can never be discounted.

If candidates are rational actors, then there should be some indication that the challengers who did consider the status of the incumbent before running had more success than those candidates that did not. Did, in fact, the most qualified challengers wait until their districts were open seats or their incumbents were vulnerable? A review of the campaigns involving the individuals in this study can provide some perspective.

REVIEW OF POTENTIAL CANDIDATES IN THE 2000 ELECTION

How successful were the potential candidates studied for this research? Only four of the eighteen challengers interviewed were elected. While that number is low, it should be pointed out that six of the unsuccessful challengers interviewed were defeated by these four individuals. The remaining eight unsuccessful challengers interviewed lost to incumbents. Were there common motivations among the four successful challengers? As stated in their reasons to run for office, three out of four, Jim Wilson, Stuart Ericson, and Ray Miller, made the status of the incumbent an important basis for their candidacy. Smaligo's case is different from the other three in that he had been a candidate for his district in 1998, losing to Phil Ostrander in a very close election. Smaligo was running in his second bid for the district seat in 2000. During the course of the interview Smaligo noted that his district had an increase of Republicans that surpassed the slim margin of votes he lacked in his

loss to Democrat Ostrander in 1998. This implies that Smaligo considered the status of the incumbent as well when he ran in 2000.

For the challengers who were successful, fundraising was certainly a strong element of their success. Their ability to raise money also signifies the political acumen of these individuals when they decided to run. As the chart below clarifies, these candidates ran well-funded campaigns. For example, both Wilson and Ericson stated that raising large amounts of money was a way to scare off additional challengers within their own parties.

The disparity for Wilson and Ericson against their competitors was considerable. While Smaligo was outspent, he was not heavily outmatched by the fundraising of Ostrander, one of three Democratic incumbents who outspent their opponents and lost in 2000.¹ Perhaps in a suburban district, as is the case for District 74 (Owasso), Smaligo could rely on door-to-door campaigning that would not cost as much as broadcast advertising. Smaligo could also rely on the fact that he had high name recognition from his father's legislative career and his own close race in 1998.

Fundraising is not the only way to measure the quality of a candidate. Communication skills and name recognition are important factors for a strong candidacy. Having the political ability to follow a person-intensive strategy or a policy-intensive strategy and the knowledge of which one works for a district would also be a valuable trait for a candidate (Fenno, 2000). However, fundraising suggests how much thought a potential candidate has put into his or her candidacy. Sufficient funds can allow that candidate to define his or her message and to scare off potential candidates. Successful fundraising is certainly paramount for candidates who decide to challenge incumbents (Caldeira & Patterson, 1982).

For the candidates who challenged incumbents, most were heavily outspent. In fact, as Table 3 displays, the disparity in fundraising between challengers and incumbents was striking. A comparison of Table 2 and Table 3 suggests that candidates in open seats can raise more campaign funds than challengers who take on incumbents. The one challenger that had at least half as much funds as the incumbent was also the one successful candidate, John Smaligo. Most challengers from this list did not mention the status of the incumbent as a reason for their candidacy.

TABLE 2

Campaign Contributions of Successful Challengers
 (winners in bold)

			Vote %
District 4	James Wilson (D)	\$92,531.04	65%
	Ed Brocksmith (R)	\$20,971.30	35%
District 13	Allen Harder (D)	\$47,202.27	49%
	Stuart Ericson (R)	\$91,275.14	51%
District 15	Ray Miller (D)*		
District 74	Phil Ostrander (D)	\$78,013.00	49%
	John Smaligo (R)	\$57,045.84	50%
	Albro Daniel	\$111.00	1%

*Ray Miller did not have a Republican opponent. Only general campaigns were posted.

SOURCE: The *Oklahoma State Ethics Commission*, reported in the *Daily Oklahoman* (November 12, 2000).

In fact, Elizabeth Nottingham was the only challenger from this list who did.

The close relationship between fundraising and qualified candidates raises the question, does an individual increase his or her quality as a candidate by raising more funds, or do contributors inherently recognize the better choices and consequently give funds to the most qualified candidates? Certainly the challengers from Table 3 had disadvantages, the largest of which was running against an incumbent in the first place. However, this weakness was compounded by their inability to raise money.² Based on the rational actor tradition discussed in the literature review, one can conclude that most challengers in this research did not approach their candidacy rationally, although some of them may have followed a "mini-max" strategy. The mini-max strategy suggests not only that inexperienced challengers are less rational than are experienced candidates but also that inexperienced candidates receive a large reward

from the act of running (Fowler, 1993). Many qualified opponents choose not to run against incumbents, which may make incumbents stronger than they really are.

TABLE 3

Contribution Disparity for Challengers
(challengers in bold)

			Vote %
District 2	J. T. Stites (D)	\$34,246.55	70%
	Joe Peters (R)	\$2,175.00	30%
District 7	Larry Roberts (D)	\$19,350.00	73%
	Julian Coombs (R)	\$2,673.43	27%
District 9	Elizabeth Nottingham (D)	\$33,222.00	41%
	Tad Jones (R)	\$70,734.48	59%
District 16	M.C. Leist (D)	\$24,225.00	71%
	Dal Newberry (R)	\$5,000.00	29%
District 30	Mike Tyler (D)	\$66,249.25	61%
	Lou Martin (R)	\$30,693.90	39%
District 68	Shelby Satterfield (D)	\$20,550.00	39%
	Chris Bengé (R)	\$54,224.00	61%
District 74	Phil Ostrander (D)	\$78,013.00	49%
	John Smaligo (R)	\$57,045.84	50%
	Albro Daniel (L)	\$111.00	1%
District 86	Larry Adair (D)	\$158,658.53	67%

SOURCE: The *Oklahoma State Ethics Commission*.

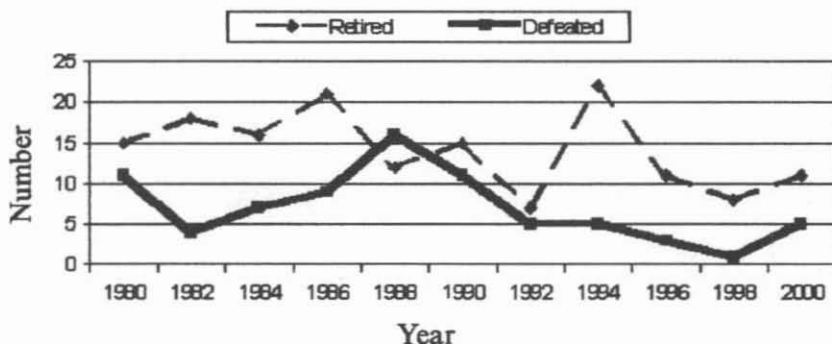
THE POWER OF INCUMBENCY

In the state of Oklahoma, compared to the last two elections, the year 2000 was slightly less beneficial to incumbents. Only five incumbent state representatives were defeated in 2000, but that was an increase from 1998 with only one incumbent defeated or from 1996 with three incumbents defeated. Nevertheless there has been a sharp decline in the number of defeated incumbents since the late 1980s as Chart 1 indicates. In 1988 actually more incumbents were defeated than retired. The election in 1988 appears to be atypical of most elections in recent memory, although 1990 was not particularly kind to incumbents as well. What is typical in recent elections is that to defeat an incumbent is difficult and may be getting tougher in the state of Oklahoma.

The greatest strength for incumbents may very well be shown in the candidate emergence stage before elections take place. Incumbents have been successful in scaring off quality challengers in the general as well as primary races. In the last three election cycles in Oklahoma, for example, not one incumbent has lost in a primary. The strength of incumbents may be based on a variety of factors. First, the incumbents

CHART 1

Number of Incumbents Retired/Defeated Per Year



are the beneficiaries of their parties who decide to protect incumbents before they invest in challengers. Anthony Gierzynski (1992) noted that the majority party was most likely to have a defensive strategy and support its vulnerable incumbents. When faced with a choice between funding incumbents, despite their weaknesses, or challengers, despite their strengths, parties will go with incumbents.

A second factor for the power of incumbency is the increased salary for Oklahoma legislators in the 1990s. It has given legislators a strong incentive to get reelected. Legislators are paid \$38,400 in Oklahoma, with the leadership making at least an additional \$12,000. The base salary is roughly ten thousand dollars more than the average annual pay an American make and fifteen thousand dollars more than the average Oklahoman's pay (Horner, 1998). It is also significant compensation for a legislature that is in session only ninety working days per year. Incumbents with a good salary have a greater advantage than their counterparts in states that pay very little. Carey, Niemi, and Powell (2000) concluded that because well-paid legislators could devote full time to their political career, they had the advantage of campaigning more than their challengers. With the increased salary, incumbents may believe it is worth fighting for the job.

Third, term limits may have caused the more qualified challengers to wait until an incumbent's term is out rather than run a difficult campaign against the incumbent. The most politically astute candidates would also be the ones who wait for an open seat because they would know that their chances of winning are much greater in an open seat. The interviews for the research suggest that the successful candidates ran in open seats or against incumbents they perceived as vulnerable. Donald Childers, a young Democratic activist who plans to run for the legislature once the incumbent in his district is term limited out, said "the only positive thing about term limits is you know that the day is coming that there will be an open seat." The risks are high in a state legislative race, since the funds needed to spend seem to increase with each election cycle, and an individual's business also can be harmed from losing a race. Therefore the best candidates want minimal costs (Jacobson & Kernell, 1983). It seems that the more highly qualified challengers are waiting for term limits to create open seats rather than compete against incumbents.

Fourth, the increased professionalism of the legislature has enabled legislators to do more casework for their constituents, thus improving

incumbents' reelection status. The Oklahoma House, as well as the Senate, have a permanent staff. House members also have secretaries that work both during and after legislative sessions. Based on Michael Berkman's (1993) extensive analysis of all state legislatures, using salary, session length, staff size, and control over federal grants, Oklahoma qualifies for the "more professionalized" category (p. 97). Only eight states that make up the "most professionalized" category would have a higher degree of professionalism, according to Berkman (p. 97). The pay and the career advancement give legislators in a professional legislature a greater incentive to stay in office. The use of staff also gives legislators more opportunity to help their constituents. According to Peverill Squire (1993), legislative professionalism also improves the stability of a legislature.

In sum, incumbents have several advantages. These advantages have increased the incumbents' ability to get reelected at greater rates than in the past. With these advantages, it is imperative that challengers understand not only their own political abilities but also the difficulties of defeating an incumbent. For the potential candidates with the most qualifications to run a strong campaign, it appears that they know all too well these disadvantages.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the reasons why some individuals decide to run for the state legislature. For most of the potential candidates interviewed in this project, the status of the incumbent, an open seat or the political strength of the officeholder, were the important factors. For the candidates who went on to be elected, including the current legislators, the status of the incumbent was pivotal to their candidacies. Thus the individuals that are in the strongest position to be elected, those who could be considered the most qualified candidates, evaluate their chances of victory before deciding to run. In other words, these individuals are rational actors.

Most of the potential candidates interviewed who did not mention the status of the incumbent were unable to raise enough funds to run a competitive race. These individuals may have reasoned that a remote victory based on their limited funds was still worth the risk, or they may

have had other motivations to run. Some of these individuals mentioned policy reasons, civic-minded reasons, or just a personal interest. In the case of the potential candidates who ultimately decided against a candidacy, the strength of the incumbent or lack of an open seat was on the minds of many of them. Some others eventually decided not to run for personal reasons or because of a perceived lack of support from their parties.

The most important conclusion we can draw from the 2000 elections is that the challengers who do not consider the status of the incumbents before running generally are not going to be strong candidates. Incumbents are able to scare off their most qualified opponents, unless they themselves have become vulnerable in their own districts. For those incumbents who maintain a strong political base, their continued election success becomes self-reinforcing. Incumbents win because the potential opponents who could provide the strongest challenge choose to wait for better opportunities. This leaves weaker candidates, namely candidates that are inefficient at fund raising, to take on the incumbents. Most incumbents go on to win by large margins, which will prevent stronger challengers from running in future campaigns. Oklahoma legislators also benefit from the personal pay raises they have received and from the professionalization of their institutions. Both have given incumbents in the legislature more incentive to serve and better ways to represent their constituents.

The real strength of an incumbent may always be hard to judge. What is advantageous for incumbents is that their most qualified challengers realize that it is difficult to beat an incumbent and therefore will wait for an open seat. What most incumbents will face as they run for reelection will be challengers that have not considered, or do not care about, the strength of incumbents and run for non-rational reasons. The result is continued incumbent success. It may not be competitive, but without the participation of weak candidates, there would be fewer legislative races in Oklahoma. While it would be best for the voters to have strong challengers facing incumbents in all legislative districts, as long as incumbents have the advantages, that will not be a reality.

NOTES

¹Based on interviews with John Smaligo and reports from the Oklahoma Ethics Commission, Smaligo did improve his fundraising considerably from 1998 to 2000. According to Smaligo, he raised \$29,000 in 1998. In 2000, according to the Oklahoma Ethics Commission, Smaligo raised \$57,000.

²Winning the fundraising battle does not guarantee electoral success, but most candidates who outspend their opponents win. In the 2000 election, nine challengers outspent incumbents and lost, whereas five incumbents outspent challengers and lost. In only one out of seven open seats, a losing candidate outspent the winning candidate. Thus only fifteen races in the Oklahoma State House were won by candidates who spent less than their opponents. This must be put in context of the overall number of legislative seats, 101, and the number of competitive races between the parties, 58. Success at fundraising is an important factor for success at the polls.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

- Adair, Larry. Personal Interview. Stilwell, Oklahoma, 6 June 2000.
- Allen, Carolyn. Personal Interview. Grove, Oklahoma, 16 June 2000.
- Anonymous *. Personal Interview. Muskogee, Oklahoma, 26 May 2000.
- Armstrong, Keith. Personal Interview. Fairland, Oklahoma, 17 May 2000, 20 July 2000.
- Brocksmith, Ed. Personal Interview. Tahlequah, Oklahoma, 18 May 2000.
- Childers, Don. Personal Interview. Muskogee, Oklahoma, 25 May 2000.
- Coombs, Julian. Personal Interview. North Miami, Oklahoma, 18 July 2000.
- Daniel, Albro. Personal Interview. Owasso, Oklahoma, 9 Aug. 2000.
- Davis, Lela Foley. Personal Interview. Taft, Oklahoma, 24 May 2000.
- Dill, Michael. Personal Interview. Tulsa, Oklahoma, 28 June 2000.
- Eddins, Joe. Phone Interview. Vinita, Oklahoma, 12 June 2000.
- Ericson, Stuart. Personal Interview. Muskogee, Oklahoma, 13 June 2000.
- Gatz, Greg. Phone Interview, Coweta, Oklahoma, 10 June 2000.
- Hampton, David. Personal Interview. Chewy's, Oklahoma, 30 May 2000, 22 Mar. 2000.
- Handshy, John. Phone Interview. Hominy, Oklahoma, 19 June 2000.
- Harder, Allen. Personal Interview. Muskogee, Oklahoma, 12 May 2000. Phone Interview, 13 Dec. 2000.
- Johnson, Joe. Personal Interview. Vinita, Oklahoma, 22 June 2000.
- Jones, Tad. Personal Interview. Claremore, Oklahoma, 29 June 2000.
- Landers, Paul. Personal Interview. Nowata, Oklahoma, 22 May 2000.
- Littlefield, Rick. Personal Interview. Grove, Oklahoma, 27 July 2000.

- Mann, Mark. Phone Interview. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 7 June 2000.
- Martin, Lou. Personal Interview. Sand Springs, Oklahoma, 23 May 2000.
- McQuigg, Clark. Personal Interview. Miami, Oklahoma, 9 June 2000.
- Miller, Ray. Personal Interview. Stigler, Oklahoma, 24 May 2000.
- Newberry, Dal. Personal Interview. Okmulgee, Oklahoma, 23 May 2000.
- Nottingham, Liz. Personal Interview, Claremore, Oklahoma, 4 April 2000.
Phone Interview, 14 Dec. 2000.
- Ostrander, Phil. Personal Interview. Tulsa, Oklahoma, 9 August 2000.
- Peters, Joe. Personal Interview. Sallisaw, Oklahoma, 25 May 2000.
- Rice, Larry. Personal Interview. Tulsa, Oklahoma, 5 July 2000.
- Roberts, Larry. Personal Interview. Miami, Oklahoma, 24 Mar. 2000,
14 Jan. 2000.
- Ryals, Wayne. Personal Interview. Tahlequah, Oklahoma, 18 May 2000.
- Satterfield, Shelby. Personal Interview. Tulsa, Oklahoma, 30 June 2000.
- Seawright, Doyle. Personal Interview. Grove, Oklahoma, 11 May 2000.
- Slyman, Tex. Personal Interview. Sapulpa, Oklahoma, 23 May 2000.
- Smaligo, John. Personal Interview. Owasso, Oklahoma, 8 Aug. 2000.
- Staggs, Barbara. Personal Interview. Muskogee, Oklahoma, 12 May 2000.
- Turner, Russell. Personal Interview. Stilwell, Oklahoma, 19 April 2000.
- Wilson, James. Personal Interview. Tahlequah, Oklahoma, 26 May 2000.
- Working, Curt. Personal Interview. Checotah, Oklahoma, 5 June 2000.

* One participant did not want his name printed.

