

VITAL STATISTICS ON OKLAHOMA POLITICS

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This section of Oklahoma Politics presents Oklahoma political data of interest to teachers and scholars. Here we examine the results of a survey of candidates for the state legislature conducted by the Carl Albert Center at the University of Oklahoma. The principle investigators are Gary Copeland, Jonathan Mott, and J. David Rausch.¹ The survey was conducted as part of an on-going project with a primary interest in how and when term limitations begin to influence the decisions and career calculations of the politically ambitious in our state. Conducted in the Fall of 1992, the survey respondents were among the first group of candidates who ran for state legislative office knowing that they would be affected by term limitations.

The survey was sent to all 278 candidates for the state legislature – 110 incumbents and 168 challengers. The survey instruments for incumbents and challengers were substantively identical, but there were slight differences in wording reflecting an awareness of previous service and previous campaign experience for incumbents. An initial mailing was conducted in August, prior to the primary election. There was a follow-up mailing in mid-September. Sixty surveys were returned for a response rate of about 22 percent. The response rate is not as high as one might hope, but considering it was conducted in the midst of the campaign with its alternative demands and political paranoia, the rate is satisfactory. Further, as will be shown below, the responses seem to reflect the population in the most obvious ways.

POPULATION COMPARISON FOR SAMPLE

Table 1 indicates that the sample reasonably approximates the population. There is essentially no bias when comparing whether the sample reflects the appropriate proportion of House as opposed to Senate candidates. The sample does appear to have a marginally low response rate for Republicans. It also over-samples incumbents as 47 percent of the respondents are incumbents. Other

data, not shown, indicate that 20 percent of the sampled respondents were in uncontested races and 18 percent were running for an open seat. Two percent of respondents are women and 4 percent are non-white. The average age of respondents is 49.3.

TABLE 1

Comparison of Candidate Sample and Population

	Candidate Population	Candidate Sample
Chamber		
House	77%	78%
Senate	23%	22%
Total	100%	100%
n =	(278)	(60)
Party		
Democrat	62%	72%
Republican	38%	28%
Total	100%	100%
n =	(278)	(60)

WHO ARE THE CANDIDATES?

The candidates are a diverse group. A sizeable percentage of candidates have a graduate degree, but a small percentage never moved beyond high school. Incomes range from poor to wealthy. Eight percent of the respondents have family incomes of over \$100,000 and 3 percent consider themselves to be "upper class". There are also a substantial number of political neophytes involved in state legislative politics. Only 20 percent said their parents were active in politics and 30 percent had never run for office before. Among the non-incumbents, more than 53 percent were first-time candidates.

TABLE 2
Respondent Candidate Backgrounds

	All-% (n=60)	Incumbents-% (n=28)	Challengers-% (n=32)
What was the last level of school you completed?			
Some high school	0.0	0.0	0.0
High school diploma	5.0	7.2	3.1
Some college	25.0	25.0	25.0
College degree	25.0	28.6	21.9
Some grad school	8.3	7.1	9.4
Graduate degree	36.7	32.1	40.6
What is your occupation?			
Attorney	15.0	10.6	18.7
Rancher/Farmer	11.7	14.3	9.3
Business	25.0	39.3	12.4
Teacher	6.7	3.6	9.4
Petroleum industry	3.3	0.0	6.3
Insurance	3.3	0.0	6.3
Retired	5.0	0.0	9.4
Politician	10.0	14.3	6.3
Other	20.0	17.9	21.9
What is your annual family income?			
Less than \$10,000	1.7	0.0	3.1
\$10,001-\$20,000	1.7	0.0	3.1
\$20,001-\$30,000	6.7	3.6	9.4
\$30,001-\$40,000	16.6	7.1	25.0
\$40,001-\$50,000	23.3	28.6	18.7
\$50,001-\$70,000	28.3	32.2	25.0
70,001-\$100,000	13.4	21.4	6.3
more than \$100,000	8.3	7.1	9.4
Economically, do you think of yourself as:			
Lower class	0.0	0.0	0.0
Working class	16.6	25.0	9.4
Middle class	60.0	50.0	68.7
Upper-middle class	20.0	25.0	15.6
Upper class	3.4	0.0	6.3
Were your parents active in politics?			
yes	20.0	17.9	21.9
no	80.0	82.1	78.1
Before this campaign, had you ever run for political office?			
yes	70.0	96.4	46.9
no	30.0	3.6	53.1

WHAT ARE THE POLITICS OF THE CANDIDATES?

An examination of the politics of the candidates shows a decidedly conservative group. Fifty-four percent considered themselves to be moderately or strongly conservative. Incumbents are even more conservative than challengers. The candidates are also primarily concerned about pocket book issues such as the budget, health care and the economy. But, incumbents seem to have a more practical view of the key issues than do challengers – more often citing the budget and health care issues. Not surprisingly, they all tend to think the legislature is the branch of government best suited to address these issues.

TABLE 3

Candidate Politics

	All-%	Incumbents-%	Challengers-%
Generally Speaking, do you consider yourself to be:			
Strong liberal	1.7	0.0	3.2
Moderate liberal	6.8	10.7	3.3
Moderate	37.3	28.6	45.2
Moderate conservative	42.4	46.4	38.7
Strong conservative	11.8	14.3	9.6
n =	59	28	31
What is the most important issue facing state legislators in the 1990s? (first response)			
Budget	32.1	39.2	26.7
Health care	16.9	25.0	10.0
Education	6.8	3.6	10.0
Corrections	1.7	3.6	0.0
Economy	15.3	10.7	20.0
Other	23.7	17.9	30.0
Don't know	1.7	0.0	3.3
n =	59	28	30

(continued)

TABLE 3 (con't)

Candidate Politics

	All-%	Incumbents-%	Challengers-%
What is the most important issue facing state legislators in the 1990s? (second response)			
Budget	22.2	28.6	15.4
Health care	7.4	14.2	0.0
Education	14.8	7.2	23.1
Corrections	11.1	14.2	7.7
Economy	18.6	0.0	38.5
Other	25.9	35.8	15.3
Don't know	0.0	0.0	0.0
n =	27	14	13
Which branch of government should we look to first to solve the state's problems?			
Judiciary	5.1	7.4	3.1
Executive	11.9	11.1	12.5
Legislative	83.0	81.5	84.4
n =	59	27	32

WHAT THE CANDIDATES THINK ABOUT CAREERS AND TERM LIMITS

Many of the candidates in the survey have clear political ambitions (over 85 percent would run again if elected and nearly half have considered running for higher office) and tend to be less supportive of term limits than is the typical citizen of the state (Table 4). Nearly half would support the removal of term limits and even more do not consider twelve years too long of a limit if there is to be one. Still, few considered term limits to be a factor in their decision to seek election to the legislature.

TABLE 4
Candidate Views on Term Limits

	All -%	Incumbents-%	Challengers-%
If you are elected, do you plan on running for this office again			
Yes	85.5	91.3	81.3
No	14.5	8.7	18.7
n =	55	23	32
Have you considered running for higher office after you leave the legislature?			
Yes	44.6	62.5	31.3
No	55.4	37.5	68.7
n =	56	24	32
How long do you plan on staying in office?			
One term	5.1	0.0	9.4
Two terms	6.8	3.7	9.4
Three terms	10.2	11.1	9.4
Four terms	15.3	14.8	15.5
Five terms	5.1	0.0	9.4
Six terms (limit)	18.6	18.5	18.8
Don't know	3.4	3.7	3.1
As long as possible	35.5	48.2	25.0
n =	59	28	32
If there were no limit on the number of terms you could serve how long would you stay in office?			
One term	1.7	0.0	3.1
Two terms	1.7	0.0	3.1
Three terms	11.8	7.4	15.6
Four terms	16.9	14.8	18.8
Five terms	6.8	3.7	9.4
Six terms (limit)	15.3	14.8	15.6
Don't know	5.1	7.4	3.1
As long as possible	40.7	51.9	31.3
n =	59	27	32

(continued)

TABLE 4 (con't)

Candidate Views on Term Limits

	All -%	Incumbents-%	Challengers-%
How much of a role did the existence of term limits in Oklahoma play in your decision to run for office? (if incumbent, run again)			
Very important	3.3	7.1	0.0
Somewhat important	5.0	3.6	6.3
Not much at all	91.7	89.3	93.7
n =	60	28	32
Would you support or oppose a measure to remove limits on state legislators' terms.			
Strongly oppose	33.4	21.4	43.8
Somewhat oppose	6.7	7.1	6.3
No opinion	13.3	14.3	12.5
Somewhat support	23.3	25.1	21.8
Strongly support	23.3	32.1	15.6
n =	60	28	32
Do you agree that Oklahoma's limit of 12 years of service in the legislature is still too long for a legislator to serve?			
Strongly agree	6.7	0.0	12.5
Somewhat agree	15.0	3.6	25.0
No opinion	15.0	7.1	21.9
Somewhat disagree	18.3	21.4	15.6
Strongly disagree	45.0	67.9	25.0
n =	60	28	32

CONCLUSION

This set of tables provides some insights into who in the State of Oklahoma becomes a candidate for legislative office. They are, of course, atypical. The minute they decide to run for office, they become unlike the rest of the citizens in the state. But, given that conclusion, we are as struck by the diversity of the candidates as by the fact that they are atypical. These candidates reflect a view that elective office in this state is not closed to an ascribed elite but is available to those who seek it.

NOTES

1. The editors of this section greatly appreciate the willingness of Jonathan Mott, J. David Rausch, and the Carl Albert Center to share their data. We also appreciate the cooperation and efforts of Jonathan Mott in the preparation of the data for presentation. Errors in the interpretation of the data are, of course, the responsibility of the editors.