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THE RACES FOR CONGRESS IN 2016

A Tale of Two Elections

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The more things change, the more they stay the same.

— Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr

The conventional wisdom at the onset of the 2016 election season was that it would be a year when the Democrats won seats in Congress and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would run a formidable presidential campaign against Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio or some other mainstream Republican. However, Bernie Sanders's aggressive challenge to Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination and Donald Trump's unstoppable drive in the Republican contest and outlandish general election campaign put to rest these expectations. The early narratives for 2016 were that voters would choose between continuity and change and there were strong odds a woman would finally break the nation's highest political glass ceiling. The storyline featured Clinton at the top of the Democratic ticket against one of a number prominent Republican politicians. As the presidential campaign unfolded, the narrative broadened to include the "year of the outsider" to accommodate Trump's unlikely emergence as the frontrunner in the Republican primaries and the GOP nominee.

Politicians and political consultants in congressional elections struggled to adapt to the new scenario. In addition to questions about how many seats the Democrats could be expected to pick up in the House and the possibility of their winning control of the Senate, a host of new possibilities came into focus. Would Clinton's early challenges in the primaries reverberate down the ballot, undercutting the aspirations of other female candidates and their supporters? Would Trump's sudden rise to prominence

have an alternative effect, fueling the candidacies and campaigns of political outsiders and their anti-Washington allies? Would the pro-Democratic national tide anticipated prior to Trump's and Clinton's nominations come to fruition, or would Clinton's projected coattails diminish as a result of the populist frenzy that bore similarities to the Tea party movement that captured the national stage in 2009?

In the course of addressing these questions, this chapter places the 2016 congressional elections in a broad context by describing the issues and concerns voters considered paramount and the effects of the presidential campaign on the national political conversation. It then turns to the impact of this context on the candidacy decisions of those who ran for the House and Senate and the responses of the Washington elites and other donors who participated in campaign financing. Next are a discussion of the strategies the candidates used to appeal to voters and an analysis of the primary and general election outcomes. Relying on evidence from the congressional races, we conclude that 2016 was a tale of two elections, particularly with respect to women and outsider candidates. While partisan loyalties drove much of the election results in both the presidential and congressional races, the relatively weak connection between the candidacies and campaigns have implications for the relationship between members of the Trump administration and Congress, political reform, and other aspects of policymaking.

Two Types of Elections

There are two overarching types of congressional elections. The first, sometimes referred to as a "status quo," or "localized" election, is characterized by contests that focus primarily on the abilities, experiences, and public service records of the candidates and on issues of major concern to local voters. Because of the many advantages they enjoy over challengers, an overwhelming number of incumbents who seek reelection in status quo election cycles win.

The second type of election cycle, often referred to as a "nationalized" or "tidal wave" election, is one in which national political, economic, or social forces create an environment that strongly favors one party—usually the party out of power—and results in a sea change in the partisan composition of Congress and other elective institutions. An election that is nationalized in one party's favor leads to greater enthusiasm and participation by that party's contributors, activists, and electoral base, thereby increasing the support that party and its candidates are able to attract. It also increases the level of support congressional and other candidates receive from the independent or swing voters whose backing is often the key to victory in marginal districts.

The ability to campaign on the same, or very similar, issues greatly benefits candidates who belong to the favored party in a nationalized election. When local and national issues dovetail, candidates whose communications are consistent with those of their party and its interest group and media allies find it easier to break through the cacophony of voices heard in competitive elections. This is especially beneficial to congressional challengers, who are at a disadvantage in getting their message heard by voters. Nationalized elections result in virtually all of the favored party's incumbents successfully defending their seats, an unusually large number of its challengers getting elected, and the success of most of its open-seat candidates.

Run Up to the Election

Conflicting dynamics made it more difficult than usual to assess what kind of election this would be. On the one hand, ongoing concerns associated with the economy, immigration, fear of terrorism and other seemingly intractable issues resulted in voter frustration with national politicians. Much of this hostility was directed toward Congress, which plausibly makes voters want to “throw the bums out.” This scenario might have led to heavy losses for the Republican majority. Given the large number of Senate seats being defended by Republicans in states with close presidential contests in 2012, it seemed entirely plausible. In the House, Democrats faced longer odds to take a majority, needing to win 30 seats. Most prognosticators believed it would take a tidal wave to bring in that many Democratic House members, especially given the lopsided partisanship in many districts (Harwood 2016).

On the other hand, the President was a Democrat, which makes it less likely the voters will blame just one party. Obama's popularity was contingent on partisan identity of voters: Republican partisans and independents who lean toward the GOP disliked him, while Democrats and independents predisposed toward their party were highly supportive. Neither party's congressional candidates could rely on the divided popularity of the President to help them in closely contested districts where the partisan balance among voters was close. The environment provided few opportunities for these candidates to claim credit or assign blame for the federal government's performance or the state of the nation.

More critically for congressional candidates in close elections was how they positioned themselves vis-à-vis the presidential candidates. Trump was clearly a provocative candidate. Several of his stances on trade, immigration, and social security were the antitheses of positions long held by the mainstream of the Republican party. He also ignited controversies with his statements about preventing Muslims from entering the country,

calling Mexican immigrants rapists, and belittling the parents of a fallen war hero. Most dramatically, he was caught on a 2005 videotape bragging about groping women. Such behavior is typically outside the norms for major party nominees and created a dilemma for GOP congressional candidates on whether to endorse or run away from him. Many Republicans in close races did not want to anger staunch GOP voters by shunning Trump, but also wanted to hold vital swing voters who disapproved of Trump's behavior. Most danced around the subject by trying to obscure how much or how little they supported him.

Most—but not all—Democratic candidates allied themselves closely with Clinton. They were hopeful that Trump's candidacy would be a catastrophe for the GOP that would keep Republican voters from the polls and win over independents for Clinton. A large Clinton victory offered the prospect of a nationalized election with candidates riding into office on Clinton's coattails. There was considerable mention in the mainstream media about a landslide election in the Electoral College in favor of the Democrats. As late as mid-October, there were even hopes that a 10-percentage point Clinton victory—which was not out of the question at the time—would enable the Democrats to win back control of the House (Harwood 2016).

The Strategic Context

Candidates, consultants, party officials and interest group strategists assess the political environment, including the circumstances in each district and the national dynamics. At the local level, important considerations include the intentions of the incumbent and other potential candidates, and the partisan history of the seat. Relevant national-level factors include whether it is a presidential or midterm election year, the state of the economy, the President's popularity, international affairs, and the public's current attitudes toward the federal government.

In the United States, candidates assume most of responsibility for running their campaigns. While party labels matter, candidates cannot rely entirely on the party or its top standard-bearers to help them win. Political parties and interest groups play important roles in elections, but they remain largely in the background, providing funds, strategic advice, issue and opposition research, targeting data, voter mobilizing drives, and assistance with fundraising and navigating the world inhabited by campaign consultants. Increasingly, parties and groups have spent huge sums on "independent ads" to help favored candidates, and in some of the most competitive races these organizations outspend the candidate committees. Nonetheless, the norm remains that candidates are the focal point of campaigns and they are expected to sustain and manage a personal campaign committee to get elected. This arrangement puts a lot of pressure on getting resources and coming up with a strategic message.

Another key aspect of congressional elections is the significant advantages that accrue to incumbents. Officeholders are very hard to unseat. First, they typically possess a favorable share of partisan voters in their districts, making it difficult for challengers from another party to unseat them. Second, being a member provides perks of office that allow them to bring resources to the district and advertise through mailings to constituents. Third, and related, members frequently showcase themselves throughout the year by appearing at local events and getting good attention from local media, which is typically very friendly to them. Fourth, as powerful officeholders it is easier for them to raise money from Washington PACs. All of these advantages create the expectation that they are formidable to beat, which makes it less likely that strong challengers will emerge to challenge them (Jacobson and Kernell 1981; Stone, Maisel and Maestas 2004). For this reason more than 90 percent of House incumbents and 80 percent or more of Senate running for reelection typically win. In 2016, this figure for the House was 97 percent, which was slightly higher than in 2014 when it was 95 percent. In the Senate, 90 percent of incumbents were reelected in 2016 compared to 82 percent in 2014 (Center for Responsive Politics 2016c).

Potential candidates also assess public opinion. They know that citizen attitudes about the direction of country and economy all play a role in shaping voter decisions at the ballot box. To the degree that people are dissatisfied they are likely to blame the incumbent party, particularly the party of the President. The public was very discontented with the way things were going in the nation. According to Gallup, just 29 percent of Americans said they were satisfied in September 2016.¹ Public dissatisfaction has been in decline since 2002 and reached as low as 10 percent during the years 2009–2010 after the Great Recession. Since then, it stabilized at a higher level through the Obama years, although it remains relative low compared to the late 1980s and late 1990s (both periods when the economy was doing well). Going into the 2016 election, public opinion was difficult to read for prospective candidates. ~~On the one hand,~~ satisfaction in the direction of the country was relatively low, but the economy had been improving steadily. These two factors seemed at odds in contemplating which party would be favored.

Related but somewhat distinct, is public opinion about the President. High approval tends to benefit congressional candidates of the President's party and low ratings typically have the opposite effect. Obama's approval had been rising toward the close of his presidency. He remained very popular among members of his own party and moderately popular among independents, but intensely unpopular among Republicans. On balance, this should have been a slight benefit to Democratic candidates, or at least provided some neutral turf upon which to wage an election. On the other hand, an election in which voters appear to want change could spell

problems for the incumbent party in the White House—especially for a candidate, like Clinton, who was trying to win a third consecutive term for the Democrats. She framed her governing agenda as a continuation of the Obama presidency. Based on exit polls of voters, it appears that Clinton was not able to generate the same enthusiasm for her campaign as the previous Obama campaigns. The resulting depressed turnout of the Democratic coalition precluded a “wave election” even though she won the popular vote.

Finally, there is the potential impact of the presidential campaign. Clinton had the challenge of winning a third consecutive term for the Democrats, a situation in which opposition party and independent voters are usually more enthusiastic for their candidate than those in support of the incumbent party. The first sign of dampened excitement for Clinton was her struggle to gain the votes of younger generation of voters compared to her chief rival in the Democratic nomination, Bernie Sanders, the independent socialist Senator from Vermont. However, larger concerns loomed within the Republican party. Trump’s popularity among the primary electorate relative to more mainstream Republicans was fostered by a deep unhappiness with the status quo and political elites similar to that which gave rise to the Tea party. The success of his populist message suggested that outsiders in congressional campaigns might do well. Traditional Republican elites, however, had concerns about his fitness for office, given his lack of political experience and his controversial remarks about immigrants, Muslims, and women. Indeed, many fellow Republicans running for Congress feared a backlash against their candidacies. This threat seemed so real that many tried to distance themselves from him during the campaign or at least keep him at arm’s length.

In sum, the strategic context for the 2016 congressional elections was composed of a mix of variables that made many outcomes uncertain. Despite the structural advantages for incumbents, the presidential primaries suggested a groundswell of support for outsiders like the GOP nominee Trump and Democratic primary contender Bernie Sanders. These dynamics indicated a strong dissatisfaction with the status quo, which could generate energy against incumbents. The situation was particularly fraught for the GOP because many of their voters appeared energized for change after two terms with President Obama, but the nomination of Trump potentially undercut this advantage because he seemed so unpredictable.

Candidate Emergence

Experienced politicians focus on the immediate circumstances in their districts when contemplating a candidacy. Quality challengers also give some consideration to the national mood, particularly if they believe that

dissatisfaction with the status quo or the government's performance will be an advantage for their party. Such sentiments give challengers who have previously held office and unelected politicians—those who previously ran for Congress, served as a party official, held an appointed position in government, or had some other significant political experience a better chance to win. They may even create opportunities for some political amateurs (candidates with limited political experience) to win.

As is the case in most presidential election cycles, the race for the White House had the potential to drown out the political discussion in individual congressional elections. Trump ran on the theme that it was “time for change,” while Clinton's message emphasized “staying the course.” Reputable prediction models—focusing on the state of the economy, presidential popularity and the number of years an incumbent party held the White House—gave a slight advantage of winning to the Republicans (Abramowitz 2016). But Trump was not a typical candidate, which created greater uncertainty with these models. He had no elective office experience and ran a brash and controversial campaign that highlighted strongly populist themes. Given the mood that propelled Trump through the nominations one might think being an outsider also would helpful to congressional candidates.

At the same time, female potential candidates may have also been inspired to jump in the race because it was clear for a long time that Clinton would be running. Women previously had run for a major-party nomination. What made 2016 different than 2008, when Clinton was defeated by Obama—and 1972 when New York Democratic Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm became the first African-American woman to run for the Democratic nomination, and 2016 when Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine sought to lead the Republicans—was that it was common knowledge among most political insiders, journalists, and Americans who follow politics that Clinton and her allies had all but cleared the field of her strongest known opponents. Many political insiders believed this could be the year for Clinton to shatter the political glass ceiling, and her candidacy could inspire the candidacies and victories of other women.

Nevertheless, data recording the background characteristics of congressional candidates demonstrate that the 2016 election was fairly typical in terms of the numbers of outsiders who ran for the House and Senate and the outcomes of their elections. The story begins before the congressional primaries, when incumbents decided whether to run for reelection or leave office. Fifty-one members retired or ran for another office, and four resigned. The next stage involved nonincumbents' declarations of candidacy for a party nomination. There was little to no departure from previous primary elections. As Figure 5.1 shows, there was a slight surge in the number of outsider or “amateur” candidates, meaning those who lacked

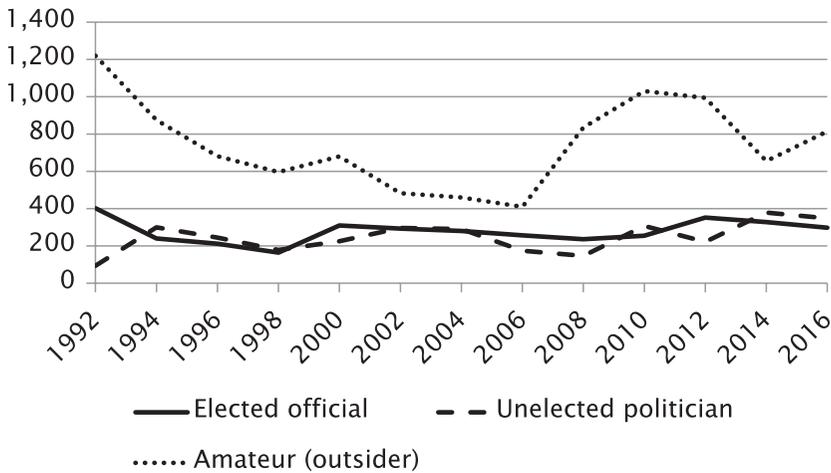


FIGURE 5.1 House Candidates: Outsiders

Source: Data compiled by the author from candidates' web sites, other public sources, and Herrnson (2016).

significant political experience. The 814 outsiders who ran in 2016 reflects an increase over 2014 of 655, but many fewer amateurs ran in 2016 than in the 2008, 2010, and 2012 elections—which were associated with the rise of the Tea party—or the surges of 1992 and 1994, which preceded and led to the Republican takeover of Congress. None of this was out of the ordinary. At the same time the number of unelected politicians—i.e. those with some form of political experience—declined very slightly from 379 in 2014 to 348 in 2016, which was not much different from previous years.

Figure 5.2 shows a continuation of the trend of modest growth in the number of women House candidates. A total of 315 women ran in 2016, compared to 250 in 2015. However, the pool of female candidates was nothing out of the ordinary, especially when compared to that of their male counterparts, who in 2016 outnumbered the women by 5:1, which is a similar ratio as 2014.

What can we make of the figures for outsider House candidates? As is usually the case, most potential and actual candidates decided whether to run after contemplating whether local voters might embrace the causes they sought to champion, giving some thought to the likely competition, and pondering the effects of the race on their families (Canon 1993). Their decision-making may not have been as systematic or strategic as that of politicians with significant elected or unelected political experience, but it had in common with them a strong local focus (Maisel and Stone 1997). The national conditions leading to Trump's ascendance in the Republican

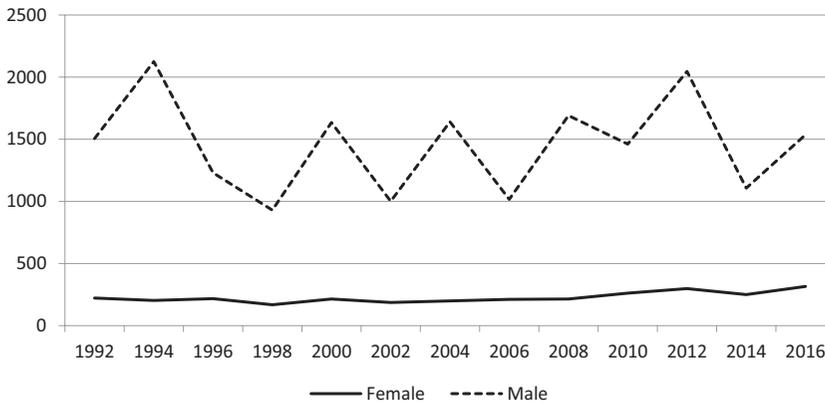


FIGURE 5.2 House Candidates: Women

Source: Data compiled by the author from Center for American Women and Politics (2016); candidates' web sites; and other public sources.

presidential primaries appear to have done little to boost the number of outsider candidates. Trump's candidacy itself also does not appear to have inspired more outsiders to run than usual.

Similarly, women who had some interest in running for the House appear to have been reading different tea leaves than Clinton. Her decision, like that she made in 2008, was influenced by national factors and the product of many years of planning. Would-be female House candidates responded to opportunities that would be recognizable in conversations at local coffee houses rather than conference rooms in the nation's capital. Many undoubtedly found Clinton's 2008 and 2016 presidential candidacies inspirational, but then they weighted factors closer to home when considering their own possible bids for office rather than follow the lead of a political icon.

The Campaign for Resources

Candidates for most offices must organize their own campaigns to have any chance of victory. The first campaign—the campaign for votes—is a very public campaign designed to win votes. The second campaign—the campaign for money and the other the resources needed to wage run a competitive campaign for votes—occurs early, and largely behind the scenes. Most congressional incumbents begin raising funds shortly after the previous election. Their objective is each to amass a war chest large enough to ward off or defeat a challenger. They devote long hours to fundraising, unless it becomes obvious they will face a strong challenger in

neither the primary nor the general election. At that point, many scale back their fundraising efforts. Some continue to raise funds that they redistribute to congressional colleagues locked in close races or party committees that also participate in the redistribution of wealth (Herrnson 2016).

Most congressional challengers and open-seat candidates begin fundraising later than incumbents, in large part, because they first need to choose whether or not to run for office and, as previously noted, more time and effort usually goes into assessing that option than an incumbent's decision to run for reelection. Raising significant dollars early in the campaign season is important to a nonincumbent's election prospects. A good start demonstrating political viability enables candidates to begin to hire campaign staff, reach out to potential supporters, attract media coverage, and raise their profile among potential supporters. This process repeats itself, wherein early success in the money race leads to hiring more campaign staff and consultants, more media coverage and recognition as a strong candidate, and the ability to collect more money. With rare exceptions, a successful campaign for resources is an essential component to a successful campaign for votes (Herrnson 2016).

Importantly, the campaign for resources extends beyond campaign contributions. It also is intended to attract endorsements and the independent efforts of party committees and interest groups. Much of it is now spent independently both by party committees, and allied groups. Decisions by the federal courts in 2010 paved the way for more outside spending in congressional elections.² Candidates, of course, would prefer to control as much money within their own committees, rather than rely on outside spending, with which they cannot legally coordinate. In 2016, the Wesleyan Media Project estimated that \$276.6 million was spent in House elections and \$593.3 million in Senate elections on broadcast television, national network and national cable (Wesleyan Media Project 2016). A significant portion of these ads were sponsored by independent groups affiliated with the congressional parties, or interest groups such as the Chamber of Commerce or Freedom Partners Action Fund, which is an ideological arm of the industrialists Charles and David Koch.

Because of these outside groups, political spending in House races has elevated since 2008 (pre-Citizens United³). As Figure 5.3 shows, congressional spending has been close to the \$4 billion mark since 2010 according to the Center for Responsive Politics. In 2016, campaign spending appears to be at a record level, outpacing 2014 by almost 9 percent (controlling for inflation).

Campaign money—especially independent spending—is concentrated in the tightest races. Indeed, in such races outside spending often exceeds the amount that candidates spend. Table 5.1 shows, for example that in the top 10 spending races for the U.S. House, outside groups outstrips the amounts spent by candidates in eight of those races. In Nevada's District 3, independent groups spent \$15.8 million—against the sum of \$3.6 million

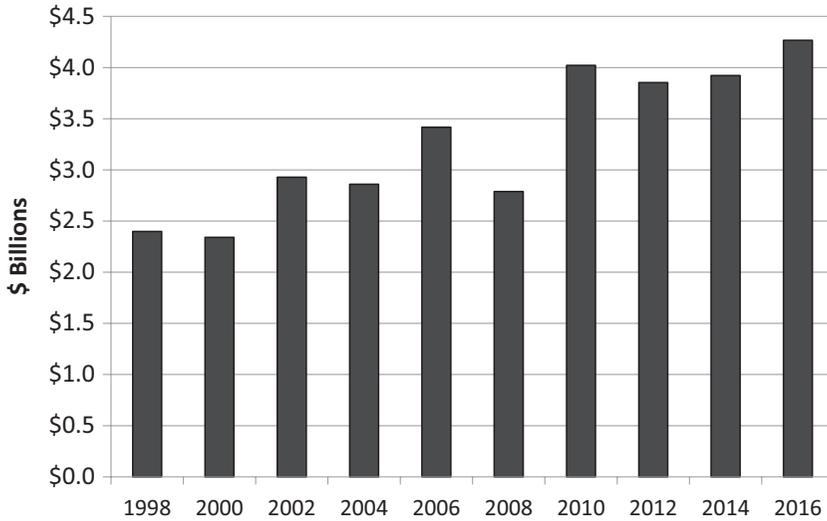


FIGURE 5.3 Spending in Congressional Races

Source: Center for Responsive Politics (2016a).

Note: All dollar amounts adjusted for inflation.

for both candidates—which reflects 80 percent of spending in the contest. On the Senate side, the contest in Pennsylvania outpaced spending in all races with a whopping \$162.2 million, of which \$121 million was independent spending. While party committees played a large role here so did partisan interest groups such as Freedom Partners Action Fund (\$7.2 billion) and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (\$6.1 million), both in support of the Republican incumbent Patrick Toomey in his race against Democratic challenger Katie McGinty.

Returning to the question of whether 2016 was the year of the outsider or the year of the woman, pre-election fundraising patterns suggests it was not.⁴ Regarding outsiders running for the House, the level of money raised by amateurs appeared no better in 2016 relative to that raised by elected officials or unelected politicians in prior years. Figure 5.4 shows average fundraising through September for amateurs was \$282,000, which is 22 percent of elected officials' fundraising. This proportion is no different than it was in the 2014 midterms. Unelected politicians fared slightly worse in fundraising 2016 compared to 2014, while elected politicians did somewhat better.

The fundraising totals comparing men and women tell a similar story of stability. The average fundraising amounts for general election House candidates demonstrates that differences between men and women are not very large. Figure 5.5, which shows data through September 2016, suggests that female candidates continued to raise fewer dollars than men, but

TABLE 5.1 Top Congressional Races for Spending

<i>House</i>		<i>Race</i>	<i>Candidate</i>	<i>Indep Spending</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% Indep</i>
<i>Rank</i>						
1		Virginia District 10	\$8,078,629	\$14,618,676	\$22,697,305	64%
2		Minnesota District 08	\$6,394,555	\$15,778,187	\$22,172,742	71%
3		Florida District 18	\$13,592,735	\$7,226,778	\$20,819,513	35%
4		Pennsylvania District 08	\$4,697,925	\$15,614,715	\$20,312,640	77%
5		Colorado District 06	\$6,585,964	\$12,965,671	\$19,551,635	66%
6		Nevada District 03	\$3,634,991	\$15,813,800	\$19,448,791	81%
7		Illinois District 10	\$10,507,915	\$8,352,229	\$18,860,144	44%
8		Florida District 26	\$5,213,478	\$13,191,556	\$18,405,034	72%
9		New York District 19	\$7,790,699	\$9,468,016	\$17,258,715	55%
10		Maine District 02	\$6,783,510	\$10,068,301	\$16,851,811	60%
Senate						
<i>Rank</i>						
1		Pennsylvania Senate	\$40,516,131	\$121,690,105	\$162,206,236	75%
2		New Hampshire Senate	\$30,063,341	\$88,906,240	\$118,969,581	75%
3		Nevada Senate	\$21,201,476	\$90,643,954	\$111,845,430	81%
4		Ohio Senate	\$31,741,599	\$52,281,410	\$84,023,009	62%
5		Florida Senate	\$30,003,871	\$49,174,435	\$79,178,306	62%
6		North Carolina Senate	\$19,206,056	\$59,943,874	\$79,149,930	76%
7		Missouri Senate	\$21,853,818	\$45,095,769	\$66,949,587	67%
8		Indiana Senate	\$19,981,337	\$45,234,817	\$65,216,154	69%
9		Wisconsin Senate	\$35,144,671	\$28,284,459	\$63,429,130	45%
10		Illinois Senate	\$25,405,056	\$4,940,998	\$30,346,054	16%

Source: Center for Responsive Politics (2016b).

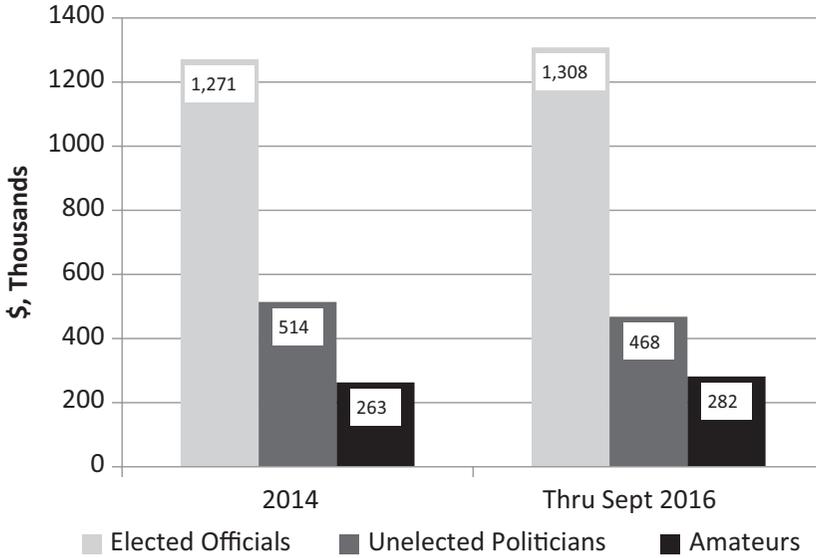


FIGURE 5.4 Fundraising for the House: Insiders vs. Outsiders, 2014 & 2016

Source: Compiled by the author from Federal Election Commission, candidates' web sites, other public sources, and Herrnson (2016).

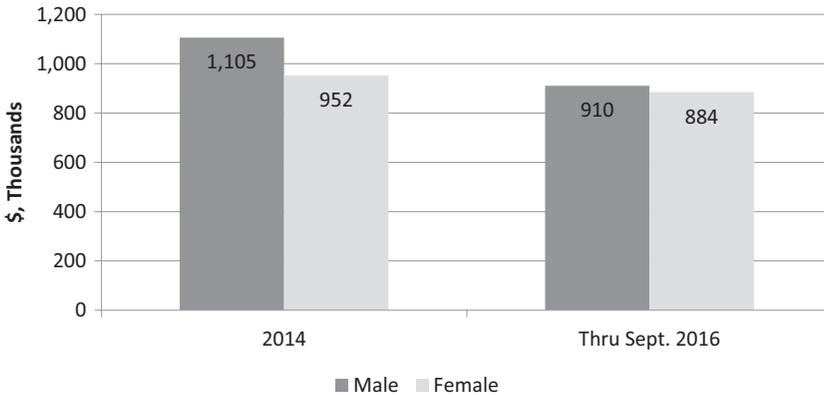


FIGURE 5.5 Fundraising for the House: Men vs. Women, 2104 & 2016

Source: Compiled by the author from Federal Election Commission, candidates' web sites, other public sources, and Herrnson (2016).

not by much. In the top Senate races, women fared well in head-to-head matchups with male candidates, such as in Nevada where Catherine Cortes Masto outraised Republican Joe Heck \$16 million to \$11 million. Similarly, the Democratic challenger in Illinois, Tammy Duckworth, outraised Republican incumbent Mark Kirk \$15 million to \$12 million.

The Campaign for Votes

Despite the national context that affected the presidential and some congressional campaigns, the outcome of the 2016 congressional elections points clearly to a status quo election in which incumbents in both parties held their seats and neither party swept the open seat races. Democrats advanced just two seats in Senate and six in the House, leaving the Republicans with marginally smaller majorities in both chambers. In picking Trump for President, voters gave one party control over the elected branches of the national government, an advantage that President Obama enjoyed at the start of his first term. The Trump victory was a significant surprise, and because the election was so close, neither party benefitted from coattails. Both presidential candidates were viewed unfavorably by an unusually high number of voters, and the winner could not claim a popular mandate. Instead, most voters doubled down on partisan loyalties, which meant few incumbents faced serious challenges.

Steadfast partisan voting appears to be the new norm. Such loyalties, combined with growing ideological and democratic differences between the parties' electorates explain why votes for the presidency are so congruent with those for Congress, regardless of who is the presidential nominee. Despite the challenge Trump presented to Republican policy orthodoxy, as well as the sound and fury of his campaign, at the end of the day his campaign was not overly influential in determining the outcomes of many congressional elections. To be sure, Trump's appeal to rural and white working-class voters may have boosted votes for congressional Republicans in districts where these demographics were salient. This may have helped in toss-up districts such as New York's 22nd or Maine's 2nd district because these were disproportionately working class and rural compared to most congressional districts. And Trump's appeal to a faction of voters may have helped Republicans in key Senate races in the Rust Belt. At the same time, the Clinton campaign appeared to perform strongly in districts and states with greater than average share of college educated voters (Cohn 2016), but these were already Democratic strongholds.

Given the unpopularity of both presidential nominees, many candidates attempted to run on persona and local issues and away from the party's presidential candidates. This is a typical strategy for many congressional incumbents, who do not want their campaigns to be distorted by what is going on at the top of the ticket. House members and senators routinely communicate to constituents prior to the election using both congressionally funded mail, email, websites and social media, and campaign-funded communications. Republican incumbents in marginal seats—and many other GOP candidates in tight races who were concerned about Trump's unpredictability—took extra steps to distance their campaigns from those at the top of the ticket, in several instances refusing to support the GOP

presidential nominee, such as Republican incumbent Mia Love in Utah's 4th district. To be sure, presidential candidates intruded on local races when their remarks or actions set the news agenda. In such instances, the candidates were forced by their opponents to respond to controversial remarks by the presidential candidates, (e.g. Trump's tweets, statements at rallies and videos), or events (Clinton's emails from a private server at the State Department, the announcements of the FBI investigation, and the DNC emails unloaded in final months by WikiLeaks).

Trump, in particular, was an extraordinarily complex presidential contestant for candidates of his own party. The GOP's most prominent elected official, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-WI), had difficulty giving his full support to Trump. When the *Washington Post* unearthed a 2005 video of Trump boasting about his groping of women, Ryan and leading Republicans began to walk back their endorsements of him and several insisted that he drop out of the race. Immediately after the video release, Ryan requested that Trump not appear with him at a campaign event in Wisconsin. The Speaker looked as if he was writing off the Trump candidacy when he suggested in a GOP conference call to members that they should choose their own path to victory and, according to one participant, he said "do what's best for you in your district" (Barabak and Mascaro 2016). This was a signal to Republican candidates to localize the race as much as possible and distance themselves from the top of the ticket.

House Races

Since the typical congressional election has an incumbent who is not threatened seriously, most campaign messages remained positive relative to the presidential campaign. Incumbents have cultivated a positive image and relationship with constituents, and do not want to see that fray with a negative campaign. For this reason they frequently ignore opponents and rarely resort to sharp attacks on challengers unless the race gets very close. In contrast, challenges and open seat campaigns need to be more aggressive in getting out their messages. In the open seat race for New York's 22nd district, for example, Republican Claudia Tenney, tried to show toughness to take on Washington problems by appearing in commercials on a motorcycle with a black leather jacket, holding a gun at a shooting range, and appearing with veterans and her son who is a Marine. She won against a Democratic candidate, but this race was not about gender or outsider status, so much as a strategy for motivating a base of conservative voters and demonstrating courage with independent voters to "take on Washington."

The success rates for women and outsiders were not impressive. Figure 5.6 shows the percentage of women and men who prevailed in 2014 compared to 2016. The percentage of women candidates in 2016 who won a nomination was 17 percent; the general election was 20 percent;

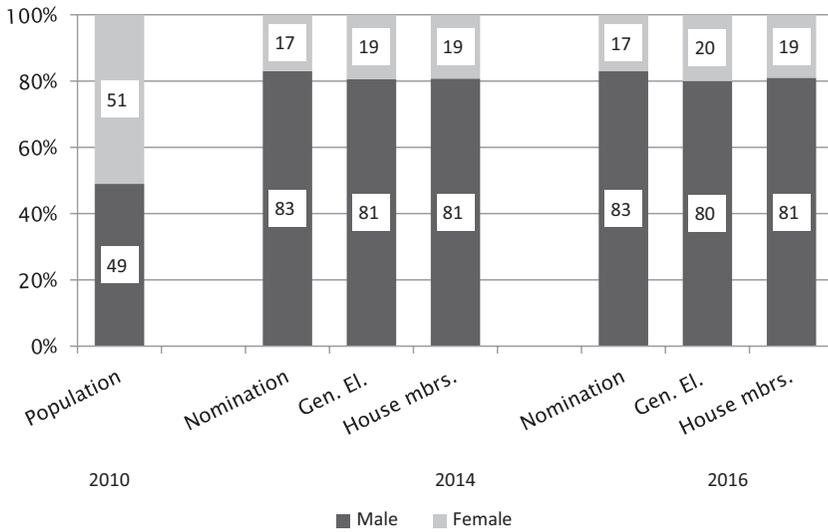


FIGURE 5.6 House Elections: Women

Source: Compiled by the author from Herrnson (2016), candidates' web sites, and other public sources.

and being a House member was 19 percent. These figures are virtually identical to those in 2014. Figure 5.7 adds to the story. It shows the rates at which different types of candidates prevailed relative to the number of candidates of that type. So, for example, among all women candidates, just 26 percent gained a position in the House. This success rate was slightly greater than for male candidates at 23 percent. Outsider candidates had very low success rates with just 2 percent of them winning a seat, compared with 19 percent of unelected officials and 58 percent of elected officials.

Maine's 2nd District illustrates some of challenges to making this a year of the woman. This district pitted a rematch of one-term Republican incumbent Bruce Poliquin against Democratic challenger Emily Cain. This is among the most rural districts in the nation and is peppered with old mill towns. Both candidates tried to make the race local and avoid being affected by national issues and the unpredictability of the presidential campaign. To some extent the strategy worked for the Democratic candidate who picked up more rural voters than Clinton. Both candidates emphasized anti-trade positions and support for gun rights. The Republican candidate refused to say whether he would vote for Trump, but he appeared to benefit from the same national forces propelling Trump.⁵ Despite the contest being considered a true toss-up (the district went slightly for Obama over Romney in 2012, 44 percent to 42 percent), the Republican won with almost a 10 percent margin. The race was inundated with independent

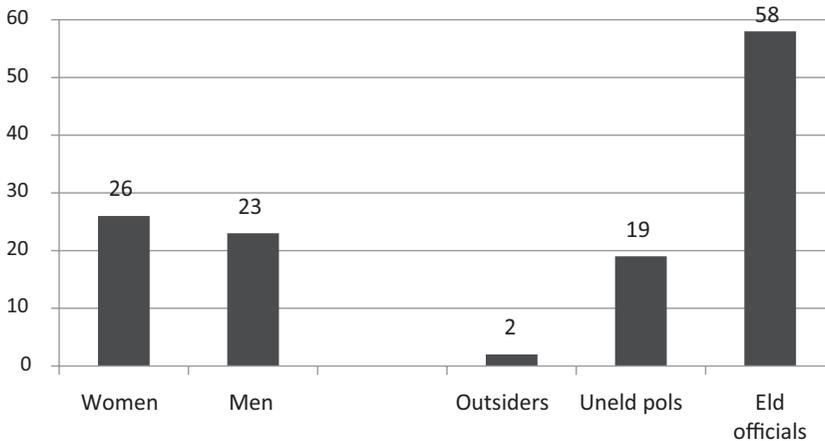


FIGURE 5.7 House Success Rates

Source: Compiled by the author from candidates' web sites and other public sources.

spending from party committees and allied interest groups such as the National Rifle Association in support of the Republican candidate and a Super PAC comprised of liberal groups supporting the Democrat.

In the adjacent state of New Hampshire, the outcome was different even though the district was also rural/suburban and overwhelmingly white. This time a woman won, but it was mostly because the incumbent Republican faced a scandal. The seat was held by Republican Frank Guinta, facing a fourth race against Carol Shea-Porter. Democrats thought she was not moderate enough for this district to win and hold it, and her record suggests as much. She lost the seat against Guinta in 2010, regained it in 2012, lost it in 2014, and regained it in 2016. In other words, she only held the seat during presidential years when the electorate is typically more favorable to Democrats. Importantly, Guinta was a weakened candidate because he was involved in campaign finance scandals that caused even members of his own party to repudiate him. The fact that the independent candidate won almost 10 percent of vote shows that there was significant dissatisfaction with both major party candidates.

Amateur candidates appeared in some key races even though it was not necessarily their amateur status that won the day. Moreover, even in these races Trump was not much of an issue, despite the fact that the Democrats tried to make it one. In an open-seat contest in Florida's 18th district, for example, the amateur Democratic candidate Randy Perkins was a wealthy businessman facing an amateur Republican and U.S. Army veteran Brian Mast. Perkins tried to link the Republican candidate to Trump, most pointedly after Trump's video emerged. The charges did not seem to stick

and Mast continued to stand by Trump. While this race featured discussion of national issues, the candidates tried to focus on local issues, too, including projects regarding Indian River Lagoon and the Everglades, and which candidate would be better in securing jobs for the district (Editorial Board, Treasure Coast Newspapers 2016). At the end of the day, however, the vote shares correlated highly with the vote shares received by the presidential candidates in these districts.

This race seems emblematic of an increasing trend in congressional elections. Regardless of the candidates and local issues, the rates of party voting are extremely high for presidential contest and congressional seats (Jacobson 2015). In 2012, district level vote shares for President and House candidates correlated at greater than 0.95⁶, with only 6 percent of districts having split verdicts. Similar dynamics appear to have been operating in the 2016 election. People who supported the President's performance were highly likely to vote for Clinton and Democratic congressional candidates. Those who did not were going to vote for the Republican candidates, regardless of who was the GOP nominee. In House elections especially, party line voting strongly favors Republicans because they have structural advantages in the distribution of partisans across congressional districts (Jacobson 2015).⁷ This is one reason why it is so difficult for Democrats to pick up seats in the House, particularly in a status quo election.

In pre-Labor Day predictions, Cook Reports listed 56 races as potentially competitive. Among these, there were just five seats that were occupied by a Republican in districts that were likely or leaning for a Democratic pick-up. The Democrats swept these (FL-10, 13, VA-4, NV-4 and NH-1). However, they had the potential to pick up many more in 16 toss-up seats occupied by Republicans. Democrats won just four of these seats and gave up a seat they controlled in Nebraska's 2nd district. Democrats also lost two seats they previously controlled in districts that were leaning or likely Republican (Cook Political Report 2016). All told, they picked up just six House seats for the 115th Congress, resulting in a 241–194 majority for the Republican party.

Senate Races

The balancing act for candidates dealing with Trump at the top of the ticket was especially challenging in Senate races where the presidential campaign loomed larger. In the competitive contests, most Republicans did a dance that criticized Trump and tempered their support for him, without entirely throwing him overboard. For the most part, candidates did not campaign as if this was a “change election” in the same manner as Trump. According to the Wesleyan Media Project, Senate ads mentioned the word “change” just 4 percent of time, and that was in support of Senate

Democrats trying to take back the Senate majority. Most ads on the GOP side tried to paint the Democratic candidates as too liberal, tying them to President Obama—who Republican voters tend to see as extremely liberal. Democratic challengers, in contrast, used ads that claimed, rather conventionally, that Republicans officeholders were beholden to “special interests” and helping the wealthy.

Even if congressional elections were not about change, this does not mean voters tolerated candidates who they viewed as Washington “insiders.” Three Senate races stand out in particular: Wisconsin, Indiana, and Missouri. These seats in the Midwest were all controlled by Republicans and retained by them. Somewhat paradoxically, the Democratic challengers were all tagged as Washington insiders. This was particularly true in Indiana, where Evan Bayh, a Democratic veteran of state politics, was beaten badly by Representative Todd Young because the Republicans were able to portray Bayh as a creature of Washington whose connections to Indiana had eroded. A similar fate was in store for former Democratic Senator Russ Feingold, who was trying to win back his seat against incumbent Ron Johnson in Wisconsin. Johnson effectively portrayed Feingold as a career politician. Both Democratic candidates lost by much wider margins than anyone ever expected. It cannot be overlooked that the Republican candidates in these states were beneficiaries of a surge in rural and white working-class voters who came to the polls in support of Trump and voted for the Republican Senate candidate. In Missouri, however, Democrat challenger Jason Kander almost pulled off a major upset against Republican incumbent Roy Blunt. Kander was able to portray Blunt as an out-of-touch Washington crony. Kander’s surprisingly strong showing was boosted by his military background and by an unusual ad in which he put tougher an assault rifle blindfolded. Blunt tried to tie the Democrat closely to Obama, who is very unpopular in Missouri, and in the end this may have saved him. Trump won the state by huge margin of 18 percentage points, while Blunt won by just 3.2 percentage points.

A second feature of these Senate campaigns is that women did fairly well in some close contests, but only boosted their numbers in the Senate by one seat. In states that are firmly or trending Democrat, women won in Illinois, Nevada, and New Hampshire, while suffering a surprising loss in Pennsylvania. At the same time, women were not yet able to break through against incumbents in the red states of Arizona and North Carolina, which are undergoing rapid demographic changes that increasingly favor Democrats.

In the Nevada open seat being vacated by Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, Catherine Cortez Masto, a Democrat became the first Latina senator, defeating GOP Representative Joe Heck. A war veteran, Heck tried to campaign as moderate in a state with rapidly increasing numbers of Latino

and Democratic voters affiliated with union workers from the casinos and hotels. At first, Heck was critical of Trump during the primaries, and then tried to support him tepidly. His back-and-forth appeared to alienate his Republican base. At the same time, Masto was helped by a significant voter mobilization effort by the Clinton campaign.

In Illinois, another blue-leaning state, the Democratic challenger Tammy Duckworth beat Senate Republican incumbent, Mark Kirk. Kirk tried to completely disassociate himself from Trump, at one point tweeting that “DJT is a malignant clown—unprepared and unfit to be president of the United States” (DeBonis and Phillip 2016). Kirk was a moderate Republican (he supports gay rights) and tried to localize the election but he angered a faction of his base by refusing to support Trump (Davey 2016). Duckworth was a member of the U.S. House and her military background likely helped her beyond her Democratic base. She lost her legs in the Iraq War after the helicopter she co-piloted was shot down. In the end, she won by an unusually large margin against the incumbent, 54 percent to 40 percent.

A female Senate candidate lost in Pennsylvania, a state that many believed had become firmly Democrat. Once Trump won the nomination, Republicans were especially fearful that the incumbent Patrick Toomey would lose to challenger Katie McGinty because he would not retain educated voters in the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh suburbs. It was the most expensive race in the country as the parties and interest groups spent extravagantly on independent ads. McGinty tried to frame herself as pro-business Democrat, even though she had strong pro-environment credentials. She also allied herself closely with Clinton. Toomey, on the other hand, never endorsed Trump and avoided questions about whether he would vote for him. In the end, Trump may have helped him by boosting turnout in the Republican base and winning a significant share of working-class white voters who went to the polls.

The closest Senate contest pitted two experienced women against each other. In New Hampshire, the popular Senator Kelly Ayotte (R-NH) had to do the “Trump dance” of how closely she wanted to tie herself to him. She was flummoxed in the campaign by conflicting statements she made about him, in one instance saying she “absolutely” saw him as a role model, and later saying she would not vote for him. She was being challenged by Governor Maggie Hassan, a Democrat who was also popular in the Granite State. Hassan allied herself with Clinton but tried to woo independents by saying she supported better screening of Syrian refugees before they could come to New Hampshire. Both candidates tried to talk in bipartisan terms about opioid epidemic and other local issues. In the end, Hassan won this race by a hairbreadth of 0.1 percent.

In red states with shifting demographics, women made valiant bids to unseat incumbents but fell short. In Arizona, for example, Republican Senator McCain initially faced a surprising tough reelection campaign against Representative Ann Kirkpatrick. Despite being denigrated by Trump for not being a war hero because he was captured, McCain said he would support the Republican nominee out of party loyalty. He then rescinded this support after the video release of Trump in 2005 because of his “demeaning comments about women and boasts about sexual assaults” (“Did Democrats Regain Control of the Senate? No. Here Are 10 Races We Watched” 2016). Kirkpatrick, like other Senate Democrats, allied herself closely with Clinton. The McCain campaign attacked her relentlessly for her support of President Obama’s Affordable Care Act. McCain ended up winning the race by a comfortable margin, 53.4 percent to 41.1 percent.

The race was closer in North Carolina (51.1 percent to 43.2 percent), where Democratic challenger and state legislator Deborah Ross tried to portray the incumbent Republican Richard Burr as a Washington insider. In return Burr, casted his opponent as being too liberal by reminding voters about her work for the American Civil Liberties Union, while emphasizing his support for gun rights and his key position on the Senate Intelligence Committee where he could challenge an Obama foreign policy that his base saw as weak.

why is this title of article here in quotes and not just New York Times?

Conclusion: A Tale of Two Elections

The dynamics of the 2016 presidential primaries appeared to presage upheaval across the electoral field. And yet this was not the case for congressional elections. We did not observe a surge in support for outsider or amateur candidates, even if many voters disliked insiders. While the voters in presidential contests elected the most iconic outsider in the history of U.S. presidential elections since Andrew Jackson, the congressional races went forward with barely a trace of throwing out incumbents and conventional candidates.

Regarding the potential for the “year of the woman” with Hillary Clinton at the top of the ticket, we did not see an increase in women in downballot races despite key wins in Senate races. Three new Senators are women. One defended an open seat vacated by Harry Reid in Nevada, Catherine Cortez Masto (D). The other two beat incumbents. In Illinois, Tammy Duckworth (D) defeated Senator Mark Kirk (R) and in New Hampshire, Maggie Hassan (D) defeated another woman, Senator Kelly Ayotte (R). At the same time, however, two women Senators, Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), and Barbara Boxer (D-CA) retired. Mikulski was replaced by Representative Chris Van Hollen, and Boxer was replaced by

California Attorney General Kamala Harris—who beat out U.S. Representative Loretta Sanchez. Thus, there was only a net increase of one woman to the Senate from 20 to 21 in the 115th Congress (16 Democrats and five Republicans). Meanwhile, in the House the number of women declined by one from 84 to 83, which reflects just 19 percent of the chamber.⁸

The conclusion we draw is that this was a status quo election for Congress, regardless of the fireworks in the presidential race.⁹ It was indeed a tale of two elections. What we see going forward based on outcome of congressional election is a continuation of the intense policy and electoral battles fought at the margins. These close margins make it less likely that parties in Congress will compromise, each seeing keeping distinctive positions in a strategic gambit to pursue majorities in the next election (Lee 2016). As the minority party, Democrats are likely to be more unified during the 115th Congress, while Republicans will continue to face factionalism between members of the anti-government Freedom Caucus and the more mainstream conservatives.

The most significant change is that the government is now unified under one party. The last time this happened was 2008 with Obama's first election. As a result, Democrats were able to push through the Affordable Care Act. However, that highly partisan effort created an electoral backlash that might give Republicans pause. In the subsequent 2010 midterm, Democrats lost their majority in the House and almost in the Senate. The energized Republicans were able to push back hard on much of Obama's policy agenda for the rest of his presidency. In races further down the ballot, the Democrats lost more than 800 state legislative elections and control over many state governments. Not only did this affect their capacity to control the redistricting process in 2010, these purges have hurt the party long-term with a smaller crop of legislators moving through state legislative chambers in preparation for leadership in higher office. In the 2018 elections, Republicans could face similar situation if they overreach in pushing policies during the first term that do not reflect a broader consensus in the nation.

Given the differences between Trump and mainstream Republicans, we can expect periodic conflict between the President and members of his own party in Congress. While Republicans are united on policies such as reducing taxes and eliminating government regulations, it is not clear they have a consensus plan to repeal and replace Obamacare. Moreover, large differences exist over immigration and trade, where the new President's position is more restrictive than others in his party. In foreign policy, he will likely face significant resistance from Senators in both parties where a bipartisan consensus exists on a liberal world order shaped by the United States willingness to shoulder security burdens, such as NATO and other

treaties in support of a Pax Americana. Trump wants other countries to their pay their “fair share” while Congress is more likely to preserve a status quo that gives the United States a dominant global presence and maintains international stability.

The stakes of this election were particularly high for shaping the direction of the federal courts. The unexpected death of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia in February 2016 gives the President an immediate opportunity to shape the direction of the Court. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell was able to put off the confirmation of Obama’s selection for the Court in declaring that the vacancy should be filled by the next President. In the end, McConnell’s strategy worked. Democrats did not take back the Senate and the new President is a Republican, which, as expected, led to a more conservative appointment to the Supreme Court and could lead to additional conservative appointments if other justices leave the bench in the next few years..

With the stakes so high, both parties are preparing immediately for the 2018 elections. The President’s party typically loses seats after his first two years in office, a product of public disappointment after much optimism. Trump did not have coattails to help Republicans win in Democratic-leaning or toss-up competitive seats. For this reason, the number of newly elected House members who might be vulnerable will not be large. In the Senate, it seems unlikely that Democrats will win a majority because they are mostly defending 23 seats compared to just eight for the Republicans. At the same time, many of the seats Democrats must defend are in states that Donald Trump won.¹⁰ A disastrous presidency, of course, could change all these predictions and sweep in the Democrats. With so many unpredictable features regarding the new administration, including Trump’s ability to govern, it is hard to tell what the impact on the next Congress will be.

In the end, this was a tale of two elections. If the presidential election was a surprise win by a rabble-rousing outsider, the congressional elections were a relatively sedate rendering of the status quo to choose the 115th Congress.

Notes

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1 See Gallup 2016, September 7–11, available at www.gallup.com/poll/1669/general-mood-country.aspx

2 See especially *SpeechNOW.org v. Federal Election Commission*, 599 F.3d 686 (D.C. Cir. 2010); *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S.310 (2010).

- 3 The Supreme Court's 2010 ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, which declared corporations, trade associations, labor unions, and other incorporated groups were free to use general treasury funds to make independent expenditures in elections, led to a substantial increase in outside spending in House races.
- 4 This analysis includes data through September 2016 rather than the full election cycle reporting, which ended December 31, 2016.
- 5 There were other close races where a surge in white working-class voters almost unseated Democratic incumbents including Rep. Tim Walz (D, MN-1), Rep. Collin Peterson (D, MN-7), and Rep. Matt Cartwright (D, PA-17). See [Sabato's Crystal Ball \(2016\)](#).
- 6 Correlated simply means that two variables change together. In this case, the vote share received by the party's congressional candidate fluctuated almost perfectly (a score of 1 would be perfect correlation) with the vote shares for the party's presidential nominee.
- 7 Romney, for example, ran head of Obama in 226 districts compared to 209 despite Obama's Electoral College and popular vote win.
- 8 The number of minorities increased slightly and mostly represented by Democratic lawmakers (49 African-Americans, 38 Hispanics and 15 Asian-Americans) (Marcos 2016).
- 9 It appeared to be a status quo election in state legislative elections, as well. Republicans continued their dominance, picking up 138 seats in the Rust Belt—probably with the help of Trump—while Democrats picked up 95 seats, many in Southwestern states with an increasingly Latino electorate (Sabato 2014; Narea and Shephard 2016).
- 10 This includes Florida, Indiana, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

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