

The Incumbency Advantage

- I. Scope of incumbency advantage.
- A. Average reelection rate in House – 90%.
- B. Average reelection rate in Senate- 80%
- C. Relatively few seats are seriously contested, and some are not at all!
- D. Causes charges of a “Permanent Congress.”
- E. But....Reelection rates take into account only incumbents who run for reelection. Retirements open up quite a few seats each year to new members.

- II. Advantages of incumbency:
- A. Franking privilege (Free mailing).
- B. Staffers (Lots of help).
- C. Patronage (Give jobs to friends – bargaining chips).
- D. Name recognition.
- E. Casework (Process of solving constituents problems through the bureaucracy).
- F. Money (Especially from PACs).

- III. A special incumbency advantage in the House:
- Gerrymandering.
- A. To understand gerrymandering, we must understand reapportionment: the redistribution of the 435 seats in the House on the basis of changes in state populations.
 - Number of reps per state determined by population
 - Census is conducted every 10 years.
 - Shows population changes in states. These changes must be reflected in state representation in the House.
- B. If a state has a change in the number of seats, its district boundaries must change. This is known as redistricting, and is carried out by the party in power of the state legislature.

- C. A form of redistricting is called gerrymandering (redrawing boundaries to favor the party in power of the state legislature).
- 1. Origin of term? 19th century Mass. Governor Elbridge Gerry, who drew district lines himself. Some of his districts had such strange shapes that they looked like salamanders, prompting one person to instead refer to them as “Gerrymanders.”
- 2. Party in power can get a majority of seats in the House by:
 - a. “packing:” drawing the district lines in such a way as to concentrate the opposing party in a few districts, thus preserving a majority of seats for itself.
 - b. “cracking:” drawing district lines in such a way as to disperse the opposing party throughout the state and thus dilute that party’s strength in order to preserve a majority of seats for the majority party.

- 3. Effects of gerrymandering:
 - a. The party in power STAYS in power.
 - b. “Safe” seats are created for incumbents, leading to further difficulties for challengers.
 - c. Strangely-shaped districts.

- D. Redistricting Requirements:
 - 1. Districts must be as near equal in population as possible.
 - a. Baker v. Carr, 1962: “one man, one vote” principle applied to state legislative districts to correct overrepresentation of rural areas.
 - b. Wesberry v. Sanders, 1964: applied to same for House districts.
 - 2. District lines must be contiguous.
 - 3. Racial gerrymandering is prohibited (Shaw v. Reno, 1993). Race may not be the primary factor in drawing district lines.

