Quality Counts: Extending the Strategic Politician Model of Incumbent Deterrence

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Competitive elections are essential to representative democracy. Competition in U.S. House elections is low in part because incumbents have strategic advantages that deter strong potential candidates from running. Many observers conclude that incumbents retain their seats without full accountability to the electorate, but the mechanisms of deterrence have never been fully explored from the perspective of strong potential candidates. Based on a survey of potential House candidates designed to capture perceptions of incumbents' personal quality and reelection prospects, we find strong evidence for the "strategic politicians" thesis (Black 1972; Jacobson and Kernell 1983). We extend the logic of the strategic model first by showing that incumbents' reelection prospects are affected by their personal quality and second by demonstrating that incumbents' personal qualities deter strong challengers from running, independent of their electoral prospects. Our findings prompt us to suggest revisions to our understanding of competition and representation in contemporary House elections.

Students of congressional politics frequently express concern about the low level of competition in contemporary U.S. House elections. In 1998 nearly 25% of incumbents running for reelection lacked a major-party challenger; in 2002 just over one-fifth of incumbents had no competition. Many more Representatives in both elections faced only token opposition. Many scholars infer that the electoral process undermines legislative representation, rather than fostering electoral accountability. Strong potential candidates (PCs) who decide *not* to challenge incumbents are, by their absence, central players in this account. When they fail to run, the salutary effects of electoral competition are also absent. When strong challengers emerge, they promote incumbent accountability by engaging voters' attention and offering a visible choice.

We explore the problem of incumbent deterrence through the eyes of those who may potentially be deterred—individuals who could mount a strong race if they were to run. Other things equal, strong challengers attract the financial and political support to compete against an incumbent, and they have the skill to exploit incumbents' weaknesses. Members of Congress (MCs) know that strong challengers threaten their electoral security, so they make significant efforts to deter them from running. While the evidence of incumbent deterrence is substantial (Banks and Kiewiet 1989; Bianco 1984; Bond, Covington, and Fleisher 1985; Goodliffe 2001; Hogan 2001; Jacobson 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Krasno and Green 1988; Levitt and Wolfram 1997; Squire 1989, 1995), the question has not been addressed from the perspective of the potential candidates themselves, except in the case-study literature (Fowler 1993; Kazee 1983, 1994).

There are many explanations for high reelection rates among incumbents, including their perquisites of office (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2000; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Cover 1977; Cover and Brumberg 1982; Fenno 1978; Fiorina 1977; Mayhew 1974), their access to campaign resources (Goodliffe 2001; Jacobson 1980, 2001), their quality as candidates and Representatives (Brady, Canes-Wone, and Cogan 2000; Erikson 1971; Erikson and Wright 2000; Miller and Stokes 1963;

Zaller 1998), and favorable district partisanship (Alford and Brady 1993; Campbell 1997; Gelman and King 1990; Levitt and Wolfram 1997). For these factors to serve as deterrents, strong potential candidates in the district must respond to them in their decisions about whether to run. Thus, the study of deterrence from the perspective of potential House candidates provides a new approach to evaluating these explanations.

The consensus among students of congressional elections is that incumbents deter strong potential candidates because PCs see their prospects against the incumbent as too small to justify the costs of running. We extend this understanding of deterrence to include the effects of incumbent personal quality. High-quality incumbents deter potential candidates because voters and others in the district value incumbents who are high in personal quality. The value others put on these qualities leads potential challengers to see the reelection prospects of such incumbents as high. This, of course, reduces their own election chances, thereby deterring them from running. In addition to this strategic calculation, however, we also demonstrate that incumbent quality has a direct deterrence effect on potential candidates' decision making. This effect leads us to offer an extension to the standard model of candidate entry decisions.

Incumbent Quality and Electoral Prospects

The literature on incumbent deterrence focuses primarily on the quality of candidates who emerge to run rather than on the quality of the incumbent. Office-holding and fundraising abilities are generally taken as surrogates for challenger quality. Yet whether high-quality candidates run often depends directly upon whether the incumbent runs. When incumbents run, quality potential candidates typically refrain from entering the race; when incumbents do not run, experienced PCs tend to emerge (Bond, Covington, and Fleisher 1985; Canon 1990; Jacobson 1989, 2001). Studies relying on office-holding and fundraising variables have dramatically increased our understanding of the electoral process in Congress, and these are serviceable indicators of challenger quality in the absence of more direct measures. But they do not in and of themselves define quality. Moreover, such measures offer little purchase on incumbent quality since incumbents are all experienced officeholders and strong fundraisers. We contend that it is useful to think more broadly about the concept of candidate quality and that variation in incumbents' quality is an important mechanism of deterrence.

We understand candidate quality as inherent in the individual candidate, prior to and distinct from the candidate's performance. As Krasno and Green put it, "quality exists in advance of and separate from the other aspects of the campaign; political quality is a resource a candidate brings to his or her campaign, an attribute that is not a function of the campaign's success or failure" (1988, 921–22). This means that quality may help explain the amount of money candidates raise or whether they previously won elective office, but these indicators do not directly measure quality. Office-holding and fundraising successes reflect candidates' skills and experience, but they may also result from other aspects of the environment that have nothing to do with quality, such as favorable shifts in districts' partisan composition, serious missteps by opposing candidates, or national partisan tides.

By relying on office-holding and fundraising measures of candidate quality, scholars implicitly (often explicitly) equate quality with strategic resources and electoral prospects. This makes sense up to a point. The strategic character of the potential candidate's decision calculus (Black 1972; Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Rohde 1979) emphasizes the importance of chances of winning on potential candidates' likelihood of running, an emphasis with which we agree (Maisel and Stone 1997; Stone and Maisel 2003). But we ask *why* electoral prospects vary and whether the concept of strategic resources is sufficient to capture what we ordinarily mean by quality. To do this, we distinguish conceptually and empirically between candidate quality and electoral prospects.

Electoral prospects are the chances a prospective candidate—whether the incumbent or a potential challenger—has of winning the seat before the election occurs. We define electoral prospects as a candidate's subjective estimates of the probability of winning. These subjective estimates, of course, are not measures of actual probabilities, although they are likely to be at the center of potential candidates' decision calculus about whether to run. For our purposes, the most interesting electoral prospects are potential candidates' assessments of their own and the incumbent's chances.

Incumbent quality is a construct separate from chances of winning, composed of at least two dimensions: *strategic* resources that bear directly on an individual's ability to mount a successful campaign and *personal* skills, characteristics, and qualities that are potentially important both in the campaign and as an office holder. For incumbents, *performance in office* is closely related to the personal dimension of quality.

Strategic resources and personal qualities should influence electoral prospects. Strategic resources such as name recognition and fundraising ability are most

proximate to a candidate's electoral prospects, with personal qualities causally prior to strategic qualities and resources. It is personal qualities, however, that are most likely to be prominent in the ordinary citizen's concept of "quality." Stop an average citizen on the street and ask what kind of candidate should run in the next House election in her district, and she will be unlikely to say, "I'd like to see a good fundraiser this time." Constituents are more likely to prefer candidates of high integrity, who can be effective legislators and who are committed to public service. This is a reasonable position, though not necessarily at odds with political scientists' emphasis on strategic quality since candidates may have high name recognition and credibility with financial contributors in part because they have the personal qualities people value in legislators.

Including personal quality and performance in office in our concept of quality follows work by Mondak (1995a) and McCurley and Mondak (1995), which used measures of incumbent competence and integrity coded from descriptions of incumbents in the *Almanac of American Politics* to explain House election outcomes. This work confirmed the importance of integrity and competence on voters' evaluations of incumbents, vote share, and the likelihood that a strong challenger would emerge.

We expect incumbents' electoral prospects to improve with their personal quality *independent of their strategic resources* because voters and others value personal qualities for their own sake, not merely for their impact on strategic resources. Further, we argue that there are two ways incumbents' personal qualities influence potential challengers' decision to run: indirectly, through their assessments of incumbents' electoral strength; and directly, through the value that potential candidates themselves place on having a representative of high personal quality. This latter value, we suggest, extends beyond their own or the incumbent's electoral prospects such that potential candidates are deterred not only by the strategic consequences of incumbents' quality, but also by the value they give to incumbents with high personal quality and job performance.

The case-study literature supports the idea that incumbents' personal quality deters strong potential candidates from making a challenge. Kazee concludes from the case studies he organized, "One of the more surprising findings of the district case studies was the extent to which incumbents are regarded as doing a good job by observers in both parties. Indeed, our interviews reveal that often incumbents do not attract stronger opposition because potential challengers see little need to replace them" (1994, 169). He goes on to quote one state legislator in Representative Jim Leach's (R-Iowa) district, "Why run against someone you like? Leach is bright and full of integrity" (1994, 169).

Our argument thus far suggests two propositions:

(1) *Potential candidates' perceptions of incumbents' electoral prospects are affected by their appraisals of incumbents' personal quality independent of incumbents' strategic resources;*

(2) *Potential candidates' chances of running for the House depend not only on their electoral prospects relative to the incumbent, but also on their assessments of incumbents' personal quality.*

Both propositions rest on our ability to distinguish conceptually and empirically between the strategic and personal dimensions of quality and between incumbent quality and electoral prospects. These distinctions have not been sharply drawn in the literature. Proposition 1 is concerned with incumbent prospects because they typically outweigh those of potential candidates, thereby deterring strong potential candidates from running. Therefore, it acknowledges the place of incumbent quality in the strategic side of the potential candidate's calculus. However, by offering a significant modification of the dominant model describing how potential candidates decide whether to run, Proposition 2 requires a more extended discussion.

Rethinking Potential Candidates' Calculus of Running

Proposition 2 modifies Black's (Black 1972, 146) well-known office-seeker's calculus (Fowler 1993; Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Rohde 1979; Stewart 2001):

$$u(O) = PB - C$$

where,

$u(O) =$ the utility of the office (a seat in the House) to the potential candidate;

$P =$ the PC's estimate of the chances of winning the seat if he/she decides to run;

$B =$ the benefit the individual receives from winning a House seat;

$C =$ the costs associated with running for a House seat.

The conventional understanding of incumbent deterrence is that incumbents discourage strong potential candidates from challenging them because they depress the value of P such that the costs of running outweigh the benefit. As a result, the expected utility of the office prior to running, $u(O)$, is negative.

What happens when we modify the decision calculus by incorporating variation in the personal quality of the incumbent? One possibility is that it is fully subsumed in the P term. That is, when incumbents are high in their personal quality, their probability of winning reelection goes up, which in turn depresses the electoral prospects, P, of potential candidates contemplating a challenge. When incumbents' personal quality is low, their chances of winning reelection go down, which increases P for potential challengers. Under these conditions, the personal quality of the incumbent would not affect the PC's chances of running independent of the incumbent's electoral prospects. Thus, it is possible that Proposition 1 is true—that personal quality affects incumbents' prospects because voters and others value it beyond its impact on strategic quality—while Proposition 2 is false, as potential candidates only think strategically about whether to run.

Proposition 2 claims that incumbents' personal quality directly affects potential candidates' decisions about running by expanding the B term in Black's calculus, in addition to its effects on P. The benefit associated with winning the seat has consistently been defined as the self-interest of the PC in such attributes of the office as the power, prestige, salary, and career advancement opportunities afforded by a seat in the House (Stewart 2001, 142–44). The personal quality of the incumbent has no bearing on these, but it may affect potential candidates' benefit if they value incumbents of high personal quality much as ordinary citizens value having a Representative with high integrity, skill, and competence in office. In contrast to potential candidates' self-interest in holding office, then, this posits a public-goods value associated with being represented by an individual of high personal quality. If this is correct, a modification of the traditional B term is necessary:

$$B = B_{self} - B_{IPQ}$$

where, B_{self} = the value the PC attaches to the office for his or her own self interest, and B_{IPQ} = the value the PC derives from the incumbent's personal quality. This would compel us to expand Black's calculus as follows:

$$u(O) = P(B_{self} - B_{IPQ}) - C$$
$$= P(B_{self}) - P(B_{IPQ}) - C.$$

We subtract the benefit term associated with the incumbent's personal quality from the potential candidate's selfish benefit because the higher the quality of the incumbent, the *lower* the benefit of holding the office is to potential candidates before they run. The value of holding the office per se does not change in this formulation, only

the value of holding the office relative to the incumbent. If potential candidates' evaluations of B_{IPQ} are positive, the benefit of holding the office goes down because, by running and winning the election, strong potential candidates would remove a high-quality incumbent. If B_{IPQ} is negative, the expected utility of running goes up with the value of replacing a low-quality incumbent.

Candidate Emergence Study Design and Data

We explore the dimensions of candidate quality and test our hypotheses regarding incumbent deterrence using data from a survey of individuals identified as strong potential candidates in a random sample of U.S. House districts. The most difficult issue we faced in designing the Candidate Emergence Study (CES) was how to identify strong potential candidates so that we could study their decision making about whether to run for the House. Many thousands of individuals are constitutionally "potential candidates" in every district, although only a miniscule percentage would be strong candidates if they decided to run, and only a small percentage of these actually become candidates. Building upon the case-study literature (Fowler and McClure 1989; Kazee 1994), we relied upon politically informed individuals in a random sample of 200 House districts to identify strong potential candidates in each district. Our survey of Republican and Democratic informants yielded 1,399 unique names of potentially strong candidates, whom we contacted in the second stage of our study.[1]

We surveyed potential candidates prior to the filing deadline in their states to obtain their perceptions of their district, their own strengths and weaknesses as potential candidates, and the strengths and weaknesses of the incumbent in the district. Of 1,399 potential candidates, we received usable responses from 452 for a response rate of 32.3%.[2] We have explored potential response bias by comparing informant-generated data on potential candidates

[1] We identified up to 10 Democratic and 10 Republican activist-informants and one academic expert in American politics per district in a random sample of 200 U.S. House districts. We received responses from 43% of our informant sample, which gave us names and addresses of potential candidates in 192 of our sample districts. Sixty percent of informants identified at least one potential candidate and the average number of PCs identified per informant was just over two, among informants who named a potential candidate.

[2] All surveys were conducted by mail, using a rolling design where potential candidates were contacted within two to three months before the filing deadline in their state. We sent an approach letter to each respondent explaining the purposes of the study, followed immediately by a questionnaire packet, including a postage-paid

TABLE 1   Comparing Districts in Which a Named Potential Candidate Ran in 1998 General Election with Districts Where No Named Potential Candidate Ran (excludes open seats)

	No Named Candidate Ran	Named Potential Candidate Ran
Incumbent's vote share	73.0%	60.2%
Challenger's residualized vote share*	−1.61%	+6.57%
Districts in which incumbent was defeated	1.3%	2.9%
Median challenger's general election expenditures	$8,937	$333,433
Median incumbent's general election expenditures	$361,080	$820,178
Smallest N of districts	135	33

*Challenger vote share as a residual of predicted vote share based on district partisanship.

who responded with those who did not respond, and the results are reassuring (Stone, Maisel, and Maestas 1998).

We have reason to believe this approach succeeded in identifying strong potential House candidates, many of whom were seriously considering a run for the House at some time in the future, if not necessarily in 1998, which was the election following our survey. Table 1 compares districts in our sample in which a potential candidate named by district informants ran in 1998, with districts in which no named potential candidate ran.[3] If named potential candidates are stronger than unnamed potential candidates we should see evidence of a more successful challenge in districts in which a named potential candidate emerged to run. The results in Table 1 are consistent with the expectations behind our design: incumbents in districts where informant-identified potential candidates ran won smaller vote shares than in districts where no named potential candidate ran. Likewise, in districts where no named potential candidate ran, challengers on

return envelope. One week after the survey packet was mailed, we mailed reminder postcards. Within about a month after the initial mailing, we sent a second survey packet to all in the sample who had not responded to the first mailing.

[3]Named potential candidates who ran are included in this analysis, whether or not they responded to the potential candidate survey, because the purpose of the analysis is to test informants' ability to identify strong potential candidates.

average received 1.61% lower vote than expected based on district partisanship; challengers named by informants as strong potential candidates won 6.57% more of the vote share than expected based on district partisanship. Rates of incumbent defeat in 1998 were extremely low, but they were better than twice as high in districts where a named potential candidate ran than in districts where no named candidate emerged to run. Candidate expenditure data also support our expectations: named potential candidates raised and spent more than 37 times what was spent in districts where no named candidate emerged, while incumbents raised and spent much more in districts where they faced a strong challenge.

The implied causality behind the comparisons in Table 1 is questionable because potential candidates consider their electoral prospects when they decide whether to run. Thus, the "performance" comparisons in Table 1 may reflect the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the incumbent or some other favorable aspect of the opportunity in the district more than the strengths and behavior of the challenger. If potential candidates are good at anticipating favorable conditions in their districts (as we insist they are), the fact that "strong" potential candidates did better in districts in which they ran may reflect their anticipation of political opportunity, rather than their skill or performance in the campaign. We address this problem by controlling for the vote received by the incumbent in 1996 as an indicator of the same incumbent's electoral base in 1998 (t – ratios):[4]

$$IncumbentVote98 = 42.156 + .410 \; (IncumbentVote96)$$
$$(8.503) \quad (5.173)$$
$$+ \; 2.860 \, (districtpartyid)$$
$$(3.585)$$
$$- \; 5.361 \; (namedPCran) + \varepsilon$$
$$(-2.202)$$

The incumbent's 1996 vote share and district partisanship are proxies for potential candidates' electoral prospects and therefore help reduce the causal ambiguities in Table 1. This equation indicates that when a named potential candidate enters the race, the incumbent loses an average of over 5% in the expected vote share (p = .029).

The evidence here supports our reliance upon informants to identify strong potential candidates, but analysis of the performance of named potential candidates who ran is inevitably limited since few of them went on to run in 1998. However, our primary interest is in their decision process as strong potential candidates, even though most

[4]The analysis is limited to districts where the same incumbent ran in both 1996 and 1998.

do not end up as candidates.[5] Accordingly, our dependent variable is the potential candidate's chances of running at the time of the survey.[6] Moreover, we rely upon potential House candidates' perceptions of their electoral prospects as a central explanatory variable, rather than focusing on actual electoral outcomes. This is necessary because, as we've already stressed, our interest is in potential candidates, most of whom never become actual candidates. More fundamentally, however, prospects rather than outcomes motivate potential candidates at the time they make their decisions about running. Their perceptions of their electoral prospects may be shaped by prior outcomes, but they also indicate what might happen *if* the potential candidate decides to run. In addition, prospects are not subject to the same kinds of causal ambiguities as outcomes. Thus, while we cannot fully determine how much electoral outcomes reflect weaknesses of the incumbent and the qualities and efforts of the challengers (among many other possible explanations), prospects capture potential candidates' perceptions of these factors and are measured at the time potential candidates decide whether to run. Taken as a whole, the evidence supports our approach. Treated with caution, much can be learned about potential candidate decision making and incumbent deterrence by studying individuals who do not run (see the appendix for further analysis of the validity of our approach).

Results

Potential Candidates' Perceptions of Incumbent Quality

Table 2 summarizes potential candidates' ratings of incumbents on three dimensions of quality: strategic resources and abilities, personal qualities, and performance in office. Entries are means on seven-point scales ranging from "Extremely Weak" (−3) through "Extremely Strong" (+3). Potential candidates, whether of the same or opposite party from the incumbent, consistently give the incumbent from their district higher ratings than they give themselves on the items in the strategic quality index. Even though informants identified them as strong potential candidates, PCs realized that incumbents had a

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[5]Rohde (1979) was the first to observe that a "prospective" design is required if the goal is to compare those who run with those who do not. His approach was to consider all U.S. House members as potential Senate candidates, which allowed him to compare Representatives who ran for the Senate with those who did not.

[6]Only 4.4% of named potential candidates actually ran in 1998. A majority of those who said the chances were better than even that they would run entered the race in their districts as candidates, while 99% of those who said their chances of running were 50-50 or lower did not run.

TABLE 2   Comparisons of Incumbent and Potential Candidate Quality Ratings

| | Potential Candidates' Ratings of: | | |
| | Incumbents in: | | |
	Same Party	Other Party	Self
Strategic quality			
Name recognition	2.21	1.74	.90
Ability to raise money	2.12	2.16	.73
Party support outside district	2.04	1.98	.85
Strategic quality index	2.12	1.93	.82
Personal quality			
Integrity	1.96	.27	NA
Ability to solve problems	1.39	−.42	2.27
Ability to work with leaders	1.57	.23	2.17
Public speaking ability	1.30	.30	1.99
Dedication to public service	2.04	.55	2.61
Grasp of the issues	1.92	.41	NA
Personal quality index	1.69	.23	NA
Performance in office			
Legislative accomplishments	.94	−.74	NA
Bring federal $ to district	.95	−.24	NA
Provide constituency services	1.72	.69	NA
Keep in touch with district	1.90	.67	NA
Performance index	1.38	.09	NA
Overall strength	2.03	1.27	NA
Smallest N	(203)	(214)	(397)

Source: All results from the authors' Candidate Emergence Study surveys.

substantial advantage in such strategic resources as name recognition in the district, fundraising ability, and support by party leaders outside the district. These results, of course, are consistent with an incumbent-deterrence effect: potential candidates realize the head start that incumbents have on them in the qualities and resources necessary to conduct a successful campaign, and as a result they refrain from mounting a challenge.

On personal quality items, there is a stronger partisan effect on incumbent ratings, although on all but one item, potential candidates of the party opposite the incumbent

rated the MC positively. On the personal items PCs were not bashful about giving themselves high scores, which exceeded same-party incumbents' ratings in every case. For what it is worth, then, potential candidates were not dissuaded from seeing themselves as competitive on personal grounds with incumbents, even though they gave a clear strategic advantage to the Representative in their district.

Potential candidates were more skeptical about incumbents' performance than they were about the items in the personal quality scale, especially about their legislative accomplishments. As expected, the correlation between incumbents' personal quality and their performance-in-office scores is high ($r = .81$), whereas the correlation between personal quality and strategic resources is more modest ($r = .51$).[7] It is also worth noting that the variance of potential candidates' evaluations of incumbents' resources is substantially less than the variance in their evaluations of personal quality and performance in office. Among PCs in the opposite party from the incumbent, for instance, the variance in personal quality ratings is more than twice the variance in ratings of strategic quality. Incumbents, in other words, tend to be seen as strong on such resources as name recognition and fundraising ability, while in the minds of their potential challengers there is more variation in their personal qualities.

Incumbents' Electoral Prospects

Our measures of incumbents' electoral prospects are based upon questions we posed to PC respondents about their Representative's reelection chances. All questions were on seven-point scales with responses ranging from "Extremely Unlikely" through "Toss-up" to "Extremely Likely." We have scored all items on pseudo-probability scales, ranging in value from .01 to .99. This scoring makes the data easier to understand and manipulate, but we do not think of the results as probability scores; rather, they are subjective measures of electoral prospects. We use these data to yield comparative results rather than absolute estimates of the probability of a particular event. The estimates themselves result from questions about the chances of particular events, including events conditioned on other events or decisions. Before the beginning of the election season, incumbents face two hurdles to winning

a House seat *if* they decide to run: they must win their party's nomination; then they must win the general election. To measure MCs' nomination prospects, therefore, we asked potential candidates to "Please give your best estimate of how likely it is that the incumbent U.S. Representative in your district will win the primary election in 1998 if he/she runs." This is analogous to a conditional probability, where the chances of winning are conditioned on the decision to run. Likewise, in gauging general election chances if the incumbent wins the nomination, we asked, "Please give your best estimate of how likely it is that the incumbent U.S. Representative will win the general election in 1998, if he/she wins the primary." Following this logic, an incumbent's prospects of winning the seat if the MC decides to run are analogous to the joint conditional probability: P(Nomination Win if the MC Runs) X P(General Election Win if the MC Wins the Nomination) (Stone and Maisel 2003).[8] These subjective prospects, we contend, are critical to potential candidates' decision-making process, even though they are not precise probabilities of the events they describe (see the appendix for analysis of potential candidates' perceptions of incumbent prospects).

Well over a year before the election, potential candidates saw incumbents' electoral prospects in their districts as strong. In sample districts where incumbents ultimately ran for reelection in 1998, the mean perceived chances of the incumbent winning the primary were .96, while the mean prospects in the general election were .91. The prospects for incumbents retaining their seats in the 1998 elections as judged by our PC respondents were .88. Thus, potential candidates saw incumbents as likely to hold on to their seats if they ran.

Despite incumbents' strong prospects for reelection, Figure 1 indicates that our measures of incumbent quality and reelection prospects are related. Not surprisingly, as incumbents' strategic resources increase, so do their reelection prospects. But there is almost as strong a relationship between personal quality and performance in office and their prospects of winning. Note that the chances of incumbents winning were never seen as low, even when they were rated negatively on one of the quality scales. Thus, potential candidates do not see incumbents' electoral prospects as wholly dependent on their strategic and personal quality. The relationships in Figure 1, however, support our expectation that incumbent quality matters,

[7] We confirmed the distinction between strategic and personal items by principal components analysis. Strategic items formed a dimension distinct from personal and performance items. Both personal and performance items loaded on the same dimension for incumbents (varimax solution; orthogonal rotation), but we distinguish between them based on item content.

[8] We measure potential candidates' electoral prospects in the same way, by asking PCs to estimate their chances of winning their party's nomination if they run, and their chances of winning the general election if they win the nomination.

FIGURE 1   Perceived Incumbent Prospects by Potential Candidates'
Assessments of Incumbent Quality
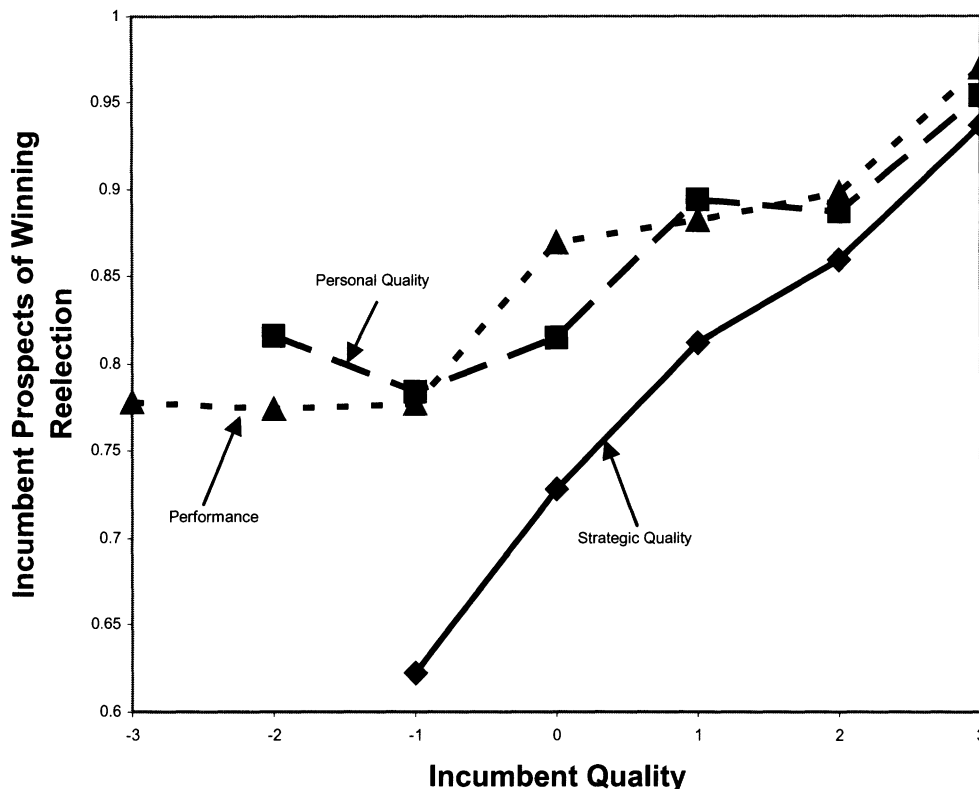
even if low quality does not make defeating an MC a sure thing.[9]

Table 3 extends our analysis of incumbents' reelection prospects by including, in addition to the measures of quality, district partisan makeup, whether the PC and incumbent are in the same party (to pick up partisan bias), whether the district was marginal in 1996, whether the 1998 elections would come at the end of the MC's first term in office, the ideological distance between the incumbent and the district as perceived by the PC,[10] and the party of the incumbent. Because of the high correlation between personal quality and incumbent performance in office, we include three specifications, one with the personal quality index, one with the performance index, and one with a combined measure.[11]

The results indicate, not surprisingly, that strategic resources more strongly affect incumbents' electoral prospects than either personal quality or MC performance in office.[12] Nonetheless, both personal quality and performance have significant effects independent of strategic quality. Strategic resources boost incumbents' prospects by almost 4% for each unit increase in strategic quality, independent of the personal/performance measures. It is striking that personal quality has an effect independent of strategic resources. A two-standard-deviation difference in the personal quality of an incumbent can account for almost a 4% difference in electoral prospects— potentially important in a close election. Moreover, analysis not shown demonstrates that both personal and performance effects are mediated by strategic quality. Both are correlated with strategic quality, and when we remove strategic resources from the analysis in Table 3, the effects

[9]Only districts in which incumbents ran for reelection are included in Figure 1.

[10]We compute a proximity score for the incumbent relative to their district on a standard seven-point ideological scale using district and incumbent placements by potential candidates. There is a modest correlation ($r = -.19$) between perceived proximity to the district and personal quality, such that incumbents seen as closer to their district's ideology are also judged higher in quality.

[11]If we include both measures, personal quality is significant, while performance is not.

[12]All analysis was conducted using STATA 7.0. We report OLS results because of their ease of interpretation. We have replicated all analyses in Tables 3 and 4 using ordered probit with consistent substantive results. We report robust standard errors clustered by district to account for the fact that observations within districts are not independent. The F statistic reported in the tables is based on a Wald test using the robustly estimated variance matrix rather than sums of squares.

TABLE 3 Potential Candidates' Perceptions of Incumbent Electoral Prospects (robust standard errors)

	(1)		(2)		(3)	
	b	Sig.	*b*	Sig.	*b*	Sig.
Incumbent's strategic resources	.039	***	.041	***	.038	***
	(.010)		(.010)		(.010)	
Incumbent's personal quality	.021	***				
	(.007)					
Incumbent's performance in office			.016	**		
			(.006)			
Incumbent personal quality & performance					.021	***
					(.007)	
Favorability of district partisanship to incumbent	.011	**	.009	*	.010	*
	(.005)		(.005)		(.005)	
Marginal district in 1996	−.042	**	−.042	**	−.041	**
	(.018)		(.018)		(.018)	
Freshman incumbent running in 1998	−.059	**	−.054	**	−.056	**
	(.024)		(.025)		(.024)	
Perceived ideological distance of incumbent from district	−.018	**	−.020	**	−.019	**
	(.008)		(.008)		(.008)	
Democratic incumbent	.001		−.002		−.001	
	(.014)		(.014)		(.014)	
PC and incumbent in same political party	.017	*	.022	**	.019	**
	(.009)		(.009)		(.009)	
Constant	.820	***	.830	***	.825	***
	(.025)		(.026)		(.025)	
F	16.38	***	15.00	***	15.65	***
Adjusted R^2	.270		.261		.267	
N	404		401		404	

***p < .01, **p < .05 two-tailed test; *p < .10; two-tailed tests.
Note: Open seats dropped from the analysis.

of personal quality ($b = .034$; $p < .01$) and performance ($b = .032$; $p < .01$) increase substantially. The results suggest that personal quality affects incumbents' reelection prospects both indirectly by enhancing their strategic resources, and directly because personal quality has value to voters and others in the district who determine the incumbent's prospects for continuing in office.

The remaining results also make sense. Freshmen running for reelection for the first time have lower prospects, as do incumbents representing districts where the previous election was won by 60% or less. As district partisanship is more favorable to incumbents their chances of reelection improve, and there is a significant reduction in prospects as incumbents are seen as more distant from the ideological views of their district. Finally, we find a modest partisan bias, as potential candidates in the same party as the incumbent rate their MC's chances about 2% higher than incumbents in the opposite party.

These results show that potential candidates have a reasonable understanding of the variables that affect incumbent reelection prospects. While factors such as the partisanship and marginality of the district and whether the incumbent is running as a freshman affect MCs' chances, it is also apparent that incumbent personal quality matters. Although strategic resources mediate personal quality, personal quality also has a strong independent effect.

Potential Candidates' Likelihood of Running in 1998

Proposition 2 states that the potential candidate's calculus of running must include the loss associated with unseating an incumbent of high personal quality. The results in Table 3 touch only on the strategic side of the potential candidate's calculus by showing that incumbents'

personal quality affects their electoral prospects. Since the incumbent's chances inversely relate to PCs' electoral prospects, the possibility remains that personal quality influences potential candidates' decision making about running only by affecting their strategic calculus. Proposition 2 contends that incumbents' personal qualities affect the chances that PCs will run independent of the strategic side of the potential candidate's calculus. Because our concern is with incumbent deterrence, we continue to exclude from the analysis potential candidates in districts where the incumbent did not run for reelection in 1998. The dependent variable is based on a question asking respondents for the chances they would run, coded as a pseudo-probability scale identical to the electoral prospects measures.

The independent variables capture the elements of the potential candidate decision model, with the benefit term expanded to include incumbents' personal quality. The electoral prospects measure results from subtracting the incumbent's prospects for winning reelection from the potential candidate's prospects. This gives us the potential candidate's prospects relative to the incumbent's, which reduces the number of interaction terms necessary to estimate the model.[13] Positive scores result when potential candidates see their electoral prospects as better than those of the incumbent Representative in their district, scores of zero occur when potential candidates see their chances as equal to the incumbent's, and negative scores result when they see the MC's prospects as better than their own chances.[14] Not surprisingly, given the advantage in

the strategic resources incumbents enjoy, relatively few (5.8%) potential candidates judge their relative prospects to be positive, and only another 3.7% see their prospects as equal to those of the incumbent. This leaves over 90% of potential candidates with negative prospects relative to the incumbent in their district, although there is variation in how far behind the incumbent PCs judge their prospects to be.

The remaining variables in the model capture the benefit to potential candidates of holding the seat, several measures of the costs of running, and controls for party and recruitment effects. The potential candidate's value of a House seat is our measure of the "selfish" aspect of B.[15] The incumbent personal quality indicator is the combined personal quality and incumbent performance measure.[16] Proposition 2 anticipates a negative effect of incumbent personal quality on potential candidates' chances of running, independent of relative electoral prospects and independent of the personal benefits associated with a House seat. To capture the conditional logic associated with the expected utility formulation, the analytic model includes two interaction terms, one for relative prospects X personal benefits of a House seat, and the other for relative prospects X incumbent personal quality.

The cost term is measured by a battery of questions asking respondents to indicate the degree to which they were discouraged from running for the House by a number of potentially negative factors.[17] The officeholder dummy taps the opportunity costs that may affect elective officeholders who must give up their current position for a shot at a House seat (Maestas, Maisel, and Stone 2000). The prospects the incumbent will retire tests the idea that potential candidates delay running to minimize the opportunity costs associated with losing to an incumbent when an open seat is imminent (Banks and Kiewiet 1989).[18]

[13] Including potential candidate and incumbent electoral prospects separately in the analysis does not affect our substantive conclusions about incumbent personal quality. It may seem that the incumbent's chances of winning the seat should be equal to (1 − potential candidate's chances). However, because the electoral prospects measures are conditioned respectively on the potential candidate and incumbent running, one is not the inverse of the other. To measure the incumbent's general election prospects as (1 − PC's chances) we would have had to ask, "How likely is the incumbent to win the general election if he/she wins the primary *and you are the candidate from the opposing party.*" In fact, the incumbent's and potential candidate's electoral prospects are negatively, but far from perfectly, correlated. Therefore, both variables in the measure add theoretical and empirical information.

[14] This approach has the advantage of simplifying the estimation problem, but strictly speaking the two electoral prospect scores are not comparable, since the potential candidate's prospects are not conditioned on the incumbent deciding to run, and the incumbent's prospects are not conditioned on the potential candidate's decision to run (see note 13). We treat the relative prospect score as a less-than-perfect measure that compares the electoral strengths of the incumbent and potential candidate, recognizing that as a strictly formal matter, it does not perfectly describe the relative chances of the potential candidate against the incumbent, if both were to run. For more on the "coordinated entry" problem, see Cox and Katz (2002).

[15] The measure combines three questions that asked potential candidates to rate their personal attraction to a House career, the effectiveness of the House, and its popular prestige.

[16] Our results are consistent whichever incumbent-quality measure we use.

[17] The specific items were: lost personal and family privacy, negative impact on political career if the PC were to lose, lost leisure time, having to endure negative advertising attacks, separation from family and friends, the need to raise large amounts of money, lost income, lack of assistance from the PC's political party, the possibility of serving in the minority party in the House, and having to give up the PC's current career.

[18] The question asked potential candidates to estimate the chances "The incumbent U.S. Representative will leave office within the next 3–4 terms." The item is scored in the same way as all other prospects/chances measures.

TABLE 4 Potential Candidates' Chances of Running in 1998 (robust standard errors)

	Model 1 b	Model 2 b	Opposite-Party PCs b
Relative electoral prospects	.219***	.421***	.203***
	(.047)	(.097)	(.062)
Personal benefit of seat in the House	.039*	.054**	.030
	(.023)	(.023)	(.029)
Relative prospects X personal benefit of House seat	.072***	.088***	.079**
	(.025)	(.024)	(.033)
Incumbent's personal quality	−.077***	—	−.086***
(PC-based measure)	(.018)		(.028)
Relative prospects X incumbent's personal quality	−.093***	—	−.102***
(PC measure)	(.021)		(.032)
Incumbent's personal quality	—	−.122*	—
(Informant-based measure)		(.070)	
Relative prospects X incumbent's personal quality	—	−.183**	—
(Informant measure)		(.080)	
Cost assessment	−.049*	−.066**	−.063
	(.029)	(.029)	(.056)
Officeholder	−.051**	−.067***	−.061*
	(.022)	(.022)	(.036)
Prospects incumbent will retire	−.057	−.053	−.074
	(.043)	(.042)	(.068)
Potential candidate and incumbent in same party	−.007	−.010	—
	(.009)	(.011)	
Democrat	−.044*	−.040*	−.058
	(.022)	(.023)	(.039)
Level of party contact urging potential candidate to run	.028**	.022*	.033*
	(.012)	(.013)	(.017)
Constant	.386***	.551***	.423***
	(.062)	(.094)	(.091)
F	12.25***	10.86***	13.16***
R²	.342	.349	.360
N	320	302	166

***p < .01, **p < .05 two-tailed test; *p < .10; two-tailed tests.
Note: Open seats dropped from the analysis.

The first thing to recognize about the results in Table 4 (Model 1) is that, as expected, relative electoral prospects have a strong effect. The main effect indicates that when the PC's value of a House seat and the incumbent's personal quality measures are at their neutral midpoints (coded zero), a unit increase in relative electoral prospects produces a 21.9% increase in the chances the potential candidate will run. This effect supports the strategic politician thesis that potential candidates consider their electoral prospects carefully before committing to a race. If they see their prospects as good they are far more likely to run than if they see them as poor. Additionally, our results specifically confirm the relevance of this thesis to

incumbent deterrence: as potential candidates' electoral prospects improve relative to the incumbent's chances of holding the seat, they are more likely to run, but since the vast majority of potential candidates see themselves as distinctly disadvantaged in this respect, most remain on the sidelines. Thus, our first conclusion is to reaffirm the importance of the strategic politician thesis. While this is perhaps an "obvious" finding, our study is the first to estimate prospects through the eyes of a national sample of prospective challengers.

The results also confirm that potential candidates' value of a House seat is positively related to the chances of running. The main effect indicates that the chances

of running increase by 3.9% for each unit increase in attraction to a House career among potential candidates who see their prospects as equal to those of the incumbent. In addition, the positive interaction term shows that as the relative prospects of potential candidates improve, the impact of ambition for a House seat goes up. Likewise, among potential candidates whose value for a House seat is high, differences in relative electoral prospects substantially increase the chances of running. In contrast, if the value of a seat is low, differences in prospects have little or no impact. This, of course, is in the nature of the conditional relationship between prospects and the benefit term: prospects matter most if interest in a House career is high; self-interest likewise has its greatest impact when prospects are strong.

Taking account of potential candidates' electoral prospects and the self-interest they have in a House seat, Table 4 indicates a significant effect of the personal quality of the incumbent. Again, consider first the main effect. Among potential candidates whose electoral prospects are equal to the incumbent's, increasing the Representative's personal quality by one unit reduces the chances the potential candidate will run by 7.7%. The interaction term

indicates a strong additional effect conditioned on potential candidates' electoral prospects—as PCs' prospects improve, the deterrence effect of incumbent personal quality increases.

Figure 2 depicts these conditional effects for a range of relative prospects. When the potential candidate's chances against the incumbent are not good, incumbent personal quality neither motivates nor deters a run. This condition applies to many potential candidates, as fully 55% of PCs saw their relative prospects as −.75 or worse. As potential candidates' electoral prospects improve, the impact of incumbent personal quality strengthens. The implication is clear: high-quality incumbents deter potential candidates with the best chance of unseating them. Conversely, low-quality incumbents motivate the strongest potential candidates to enter the race. The flip side of Representatives' personal quality as deterrent is that when MCs are seen as low in personal quality and performance, they are more likely to entice strong potential candidates to challenge them. And the stronger the potential candidate's prospects are for unseating the incumbent, the greater the motivation is to run against a low quality incumbent.

FIGURE 2   Potential Candidates' Chances of Running for the House on Incumbent Personal Quality, by Level of PCs' Electoral Prospects
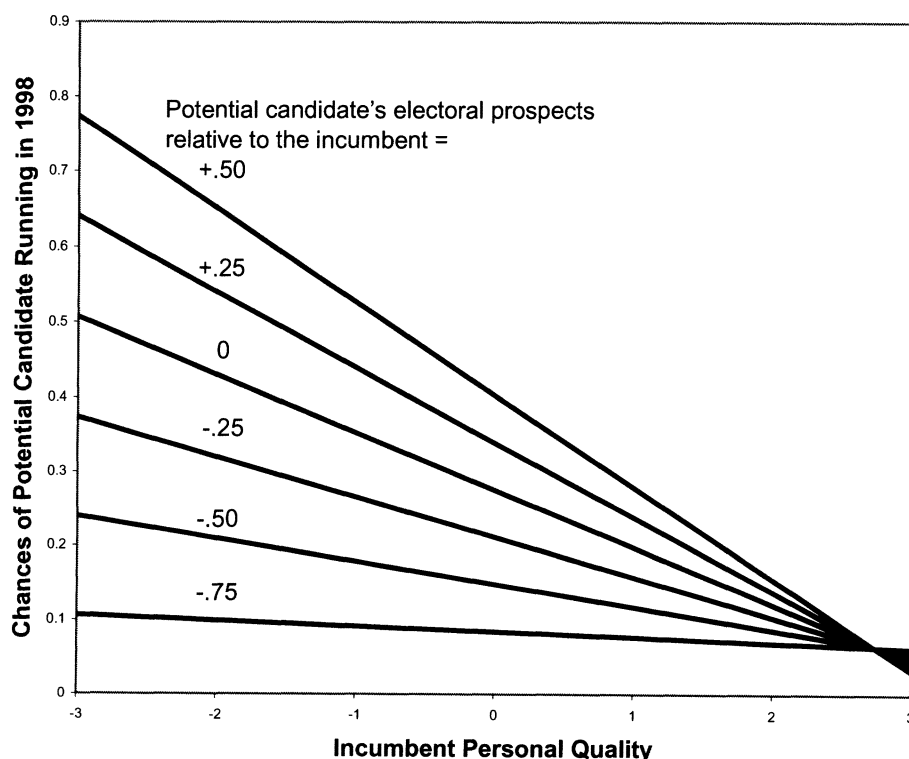
In addition to the main effect, the impact of electoral prospects depends to a substantial degree on incumbents' personal quality. For instance, when the incumbent is judged to be of low quality (say, at −2), the model estimates an increase of 44% in chances of running for a unit increase in relative electoral prospects. In contrast, when the incumbent is of high personal quality (say, +2) the effect of potential candidates' relative electoral prospects on their chances of running shrinks dramatically (to 5.8%).

While incumbent quality influences potential candidates' chances of running independent of strategic calculations, it is also true that personal quality affects the chances PCs run indirectly through its effect on relative prospects. We saw in Table 3 that higher incumbent personal quality improves their prospects, which, of course, depresses potential candidates' relative prospects. Thus, for example, more than 10% of potential candidates who rated the incumbent low in personal quality saw their relative prospects against the incumbent as positive, whereas less than 4% of those who favorably rated the incumbent's personal quality gave themselves positive relative prospects. As a result, high-quality incumbents doubly deter potential candidates, first because potential candidates see their own prospects reduced by such incumbents, and second by their diminished desire to challenge an incumbent they respect apart from their chances of winning.

Because most potential candidates see their prospects as poor against their incumbent, only a few are in a strong enough position electorally to consider running against a personally weak incumbent. Seen in this light, incumbents' personal quality has only a marginal net impact because so few potential candidates have strong enough prospects to be nudged toward running—or deterred from running—by incumbent quality. On the other hand, because incumbents' personal quality also affects relative prospects, the net impact on the decision to run is strengthened. Low-quality incumbents, for instance, motivate the strongest potential candidates to challenge them because such incumbents increase the utility of running, *and* because they improve the potential candidates' prospects of winning. In sum, while electoral prospects dominate strong potential candidates' decisions to run, incumbent quality has a marked impact, both because of its direct effect, and because of its impact on their strategic calculations.

We include Model 2 in Table 4 to confront the possibility that potential candidates' judgments of incumbent quality are merely rationalizations of their decision not to run. The easiest way of eliminating this hypothesis is with a measure of incumbent personal quality that is independent of potential candidates' decision to run, because it is drawn from an independent source. We use our district informant samples to provide an estimate by computing the mean informant perception of the incumbent's personal quality, based on the same survey items in the personal quality index as we used in the PC survey.[19] Model 2 shows a significant effect the informant-based measure of incumbent quality, which strengthens our claim that incumbent personal quality affects potential candidates' decision making about running.

In both specifications, the cost terms are significant and in the hypothesized direction. The greater potential candidates' assessment of the costs of running for Congress, the less likely they are to run; potential candidates who held elective office at the time of our survey were, other things equal, 5.1% less likely to run in 1998 than potential candidates who had no current office at risk. The effect of PCs' estimates that the incumbent would retire in the near term is not significant, though the sign suggests potential candidates may have been deterred from running as the chances of the incumbent retiring increased.

Finally, with the rest of the variables in the model controlled, being in the same party as the incumbent had no significant effect, although the sign is in the expected direction. Democrats, however, were less likely to run than Republicans. In addition, recruitment efforts by national and local party organizations increased the chances that potential candidates would run in 1998, over and above the potential candidate's prospects, the incumbent's quality, and potential candidates' assessments of the costs of running.

Because we cannot estimate a fully interactive model based on whether the PC and the incumbent are in opposite parties, we also present a separate analysis of out-party potential candidates in Table 4. Once again, the results are reassuring in showing a significant impact of incumbents' personal quality. In other words, potential candidates in the district opposition are less likely to mount a challenge when they judge the incumbent's personal quality as positive, and they are more likely to run when they see the incumbent as personally weak in quality.[20]

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[19]We treat the mean informant perception of the incumbent's personal quality (including the performance items) as an attribute of the incumbent. Because the measure does not rely on data from the PC survey, it cannot result from PC rationalization.

[20]The in-party PC analysis does not show a significant effect of incumbent personal quality, leading to the tentative conclusion that the effect interacts with opposition status. However, we are reluctant to place much weight on the in-party estimation because there is limited variance on the incumbent prospects and quality measures. Moreover, in-party PCs are extremely reluctant to consider challenging an incumbent, so the variance on the dependent variable is also low.

Conclusion

The concept of candidate quality as it is usually employed in the literature on House elections needs elaboration. With the possible exception of Mondak's work on incumbent integrity and competence (Mondak 1995a), no one to our knowledge has taken seriously the idea that quality extends beyond the ability to attract votes.[21] This conception of quality has led to the important, but limited, conclusion that incumbents, because of their overwhelming advantage in electoral firepower, deter high-quality (i.e., electorally strong) candidates from challenging them.

Our approach has been to identify strong potential House candidates in a sample of districts and study the mechanisms whereby incumbents deter them from running. Our data support conventional expectations about the relevance of strategic factors in potential candidates' decision making. Although politically aware informants in their districts identified them as strong, the potential candidates in our study see incumbents as better endowed in strategic resources than they are. By their own lights, they start substantially behind the average incumbent in name recognition, fundraising ability, and support from other elites. As a result, they see incumbents' chances of reelection as dramatically better than their own prospects of winning the seat. Accordingly, their prospects improve if the incumbent in their district is not running for reelection. Our potential-candidate respondents in open districts gave their chances of winning the seat if they were to run as .34; those in districts where incumbents ran for reelection in 1998 gave their prospects of winning the seat as only .18.

All of this is consistent with the "strategic politician" literature that emphasizes the importance of the *P* term in potential candidates' decision calculus. One reason incumbent House members are so secure is because they typically are not challenged by strong candidates with the necessary resources and skills. Individuals who *might* provide a stiff challenge are available in the typical district (Maisel, Stone, and Maestas 2001), but they do not step forward because the incumbent is formidable. In short, our data confirm the powerful—even dominant—strategic basis of the incumbent-deterrence effect in contemporary House elections. But there is more to the story.

Apart from the costs inherent in running for Congress, the other component of the potential candidate's calculus is in the *B*, or benefit, term. This has been conceptualized as the utility, or self-interest, the potential

candidate has in holding a House seat. Our results argue for expanding the *B* term to the personal quality incumbents bring to their job as Representative. This amounts to a significant theoretical refinement to Black's calculus. The only basis in the traditional formulation for an incumbent-deterrence effect is in the incumbent's effect on *P*. Our evidence supports expanding the benefit term to include the utility the PC derives from the personal quality of the incumbent. Incumbent deterrence is rooted not only in *P* but also firmly in *B*.

Expanding the benefit term in this way is not merely a theoretical nicety that tidies up our understanding of what motivates potential candidates for Congress. When potential candidates with the wherewithal to mount a significant challenge are deterred for purely strategic reasons, the consequences for the system of representation are potentially severe. Incumbents have incentives to manipulate the process to increase their electoral advantages over high-quality potential challengers, incumbent reelection rates go up, and the electoral process impairs representation.

However, in a system where potential candidates defer to incumbents in part because they value those of high quality, incumbent reelection rates due to the absence of high-quality challengers suggest a different interpretation. So long as potential candidates are reasonably accurate in their perceptions of incumbent quality, their reluctance to challenge high-quality incumbents, *and especially their motivation to run against incumbents who are of lesser personal quality*, promotes quality office holders. In this light, "incumbent deterrence" reinforces accountability and responsibility on the part of office holders. Yet when visible, skilled, and attractive potential candidates challenge an incumbent, a "costly signal" is sent to voters that something is amiss. As Lupia and McCubbins put it, "If a challenger . . . mounts a very expensive campaign against an incumbent, voters can infer . . . that there are substantial personal and policy differences between the challenger and the incumbent" (1998, 209). In the absence of such a signal, voters may infer that the incumbent is of high personal quality and doing a reasonably good job.

To be sure, personal quality is not everything when it comes to representation, nor is the effect we observe so strong as to outweigh in many cases the dominant impact of strategic calculations. Out-party potential candidates would, in almost every case, provide different policy representation than the incumbent, no matter how high the MC's personal quality. And the effects of personal quality we have seen, while consistent and significant, would not overwhelm electoral prospects in motivating potential candidates to run. Nonetheless, we have shown that incumbent quality affects both the strategic calculations

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[21] Mondak certainly argues for the importance of integrity and competence, but he lacks the data to address our question of whether these effects are independent of strategic factors.

potential candidates make and their utility for a House seat. Thus, high-quality incumbents deter some potential candidates who might otherwise run, while low-quality incumbents stimulate others who might otherwise remain on the sidelines. In years where national tides favor one party more strongly than they did in 1998, it is easy to imagine personal quality combining with prospects to motivate a significant number of potential candidates, bringing meaningful change in the quality of the average member of Congress (cf. Mondak 1995b). Our results, in short, compel us to rethink our understanding of why strong potential candidates run—and do *not* run. With even a marginal impact of personal quality in the incumbent-deterrence mix, a more optimistic reading of the meaning of incumbency and electoral competition is in order.

Appendix

Assessing Measures of Incumbents' Prospects and Quality

Potential candidates' perceptions of their incumbent's electoral prospects are at the center of our analyses of potential candidate decision making. One implication is that potential candidates' perceptions of incumbent prospects should relate to how well incumbents do in the upcoming election. Very few incumbents lost in 1998, so inadequate variance prevents us from modeling the probability of incumbents winning. Instead, we analyze incumbents' vote share in 1998 because vote shares ought to be related, albeit imperfectly, to potential candidates' perceptions of incumbent prospects, especially since prospects reflect electoral strengths and resources.[22] The zero-order correlation between potential candidates' perceptions of their incumbent's prospects and the incumbent's vote share in 1998 is moderately positive $(r = .358)$.[23]

We expect that potential candidates' estimates of their incumbents' prospects are informed by their incumbents' resources and skills, their performance in office, their

[22]The relevant concept for our decision model is electoral prospects rather than outcomes. When a potential candidate assesses her strategic environment and concludes that the incumbent's chances of winning reelection are high, this perception is what is relevant to her decision about whether to run, not what subsequently happens many months later in the election. Nonetheless, there ought to be a relationship between judgments about prospects and what eventually occurs, even though we are unsure of exactly what the nature or strength of that relationship should be.

[23]The units of analysis are districts and/or incumbents. Accordingly, we aggregate potential candidates' perceptions about incumbent prospects and quality, and of district partisanship to the district level. Estimates are based on mean PC perceptions, corrected for the partisanship of the PC.

TABLE A1   Explaining Incumbents' Vote Share, 1998 (Excludes Open Seats, 1996 and 1998) (standard errors)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Incumbents' vote	.403***	.216***	.219***
share, 1996	(.078)	(.050)	(.050)
Favorability of	2.650***	1.599***	1.909***
District	(.796)	(.501)	(.519)
Partisanship to			
Incumbent			
Potential	32.111***	21.985***	15.814**
Candidates'	(10.991)	(6.884)	(7.441)
Perceptions of			
Incumbent's			
General Election			
Prospects			
No Challenger in		21.941***	22.106***
District, 1998		(1.421)	(1.408)
Potential			1.629**
Candidates'			(.799)
Perceptions of			
Incumbent's			
Personal Quality			
Constant	12.551***	29.750***	33.220***
	(10.087)	(6.387)	(6.546)
F	32.248***	121.841***	100.353
Adjusted R^2	.378	.758	.763
N	155	155	155

Note: District/incumbent is unit of analysis; potential candidate perceptions aggregated by district.
***p < .01, **p < .05 two-tailed test; *p < .10; two-tailed tests.

anticipation of the strength of the challenger that may emerge in the next election, changes that may have occurred in the district, national conditions, and a host of other factors. The coefficient in Equation 1 (see Table A1) indicates a significant effect of incumbents' prospects, independent of district partisanship and 1996 vote share. This is good evidence that potential candidates' assessments of MCs' prospects capture more than the electoral record from the previous election and the partisan predisposition of the district.

In Model 2, we include a dummy variable for the absence of a challenger in the 1998 elections, since incumbents win a much higher vote share when they are not challenged. Since potential candidates anticipate the strength of the incumbent that contributes to the absence of a challenge, these districts could be outliers that drive the relationship between prospects and vote share in Equation 1. Even with this control, PC estimates of incumbent prospects continue to predict 1998 vote share.

In Model 3, we include the mean perception of the incumbent's combined personal and performance score. Incumbents' personal quality ratings should positively relate to their vote share in 1998. Note that the effect of incumbent personal quality is independent of strategic factors, including potential candidates' estimates of their prospects. This further supports our thesis that incumbents' personal quality affects their reelection.

Following McCurley and Mondak (1995), we also investigated the effect of PCs' ratings of the personal quality of incumbents on individual voters' evaluations of the candidates in our sample districts that include NES respondents to the 1998 mid-year survey. Our analysis, like McCurley and Mondak's, suggests that MCs' personal qualities affect incumbent thermometer evaluations by ordinary citizens (t – ratios):[24]

$$IncTherm = 41.979 + 5.132\,(PID)$$
$$(6.808)\quad(10.321)$$
$$+ 15.501\,(IncChances)$$
$$(1.963)$$
$$+ 4.054\,(PersonalQuality) + \varepsilon$$
$$(3.082)$$

Potential candidates' ratings of incumbents' prospects and personal quality have positive effects on constituents' evaluations of the incumbent. Prospects measure electoral resources and strength, which affects thermometer evaluations because incumbents whose chances are judged by PCs as strong are more effective and visible campaigners. The substantive effect of prospects on the thermometer scores is not especially large, because its maximum effect of 15.5 degrees reflects a theoretical range of incumbent prospects from 0 to 1. In fact, however, potential candidates saw most incumbents in the sample as having excellent chances of reelection (.86 for incumbents whose districts overlap with the NES sample), with relatively little variation in those prospects (standard deviation = .18). Incumbents' personal quality on the seven-point scale varies more (mean = .78; standard deviation = 1.1), and the estimate of its effect on voters' thermometer ratings is strong. The difference between an incumbent rated by potential candidates in the district at −1 in personal quality and one rated +2, a difference well within the range of observations within the sample, would be over 12 degrees.

[24]We exclude open seats in 1996 and 1998. We have compared the districts in our sample that include NES respondents (63 of the 200 CES sample districts include NES respondents). The NES districts in the CES sample appear to over-represent open seats in 1998 (p by χ^2= .16) and to under-represent open seats in 1996 (p = .04), but open seats in either year are excluded in any case. Other comparisons, e.g., on PCs' aggregate perceptions of incumbents' prospects and personal quality, are not close to significant.

In sum, there is ample evidence that potential candidates' perceptions and evaluations relate to incumbents' electoral performance and in constituents' response to their incumbent. This evidence lends additional support to our design and measures of electoral prospects and incumbent personal quality.

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