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# Party Committee Targeting and the Evolution of Competition in US House Elections

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper examines the effects of the increased role of party organizations in the recruitment and funding of congressional candidates in the US House post-1994. The recent uncertainty over which party will gain majority control of the House has transformed the role of party organizations in House campaigns. Despite the new resources devoted to each competitive seat in the House we find minimal changes in the overall competitiveness of US House elections. Additionally, the vast majority of potentially competitive seats do not draw a high quality challenger. Our results suggest that if parties recruited more quality candidates in the full range of these conceivably winnable seats this effort could produce more competitive seats or more seat turnover in the House.*

## Introduction

The 1994 congressional elections were a watershed moment for competition over majority control of the US House of Representatives. The Republican Party picked up more than 50 seats and captured majority control of the chamber for the first time in four decades. In each subsequent election cycle, both parties have been able to see a realistic path to gaining or losing majority status in the chamber and control has shifted on two occasions (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006).<sup>1</sup> This heightened level of inter-party competition for majority status was not common prior to 1994. For the 20 consecutive congresses of Democratic control between 1955 and 1994, the minority party Republicans averaged holding only 174 out of the 435 available seats (40%) and held as many as 200 seats on only two occasions. However, in the first ten congresses occurring post-1994, the minority party has averaged 201.2 seats (46.25%).

It is clear to many congressional observers that this constant uncertainty about majority control has led the two major party organizations to develop new strategies and institutions that have fundamentally changed the way elections are funded and

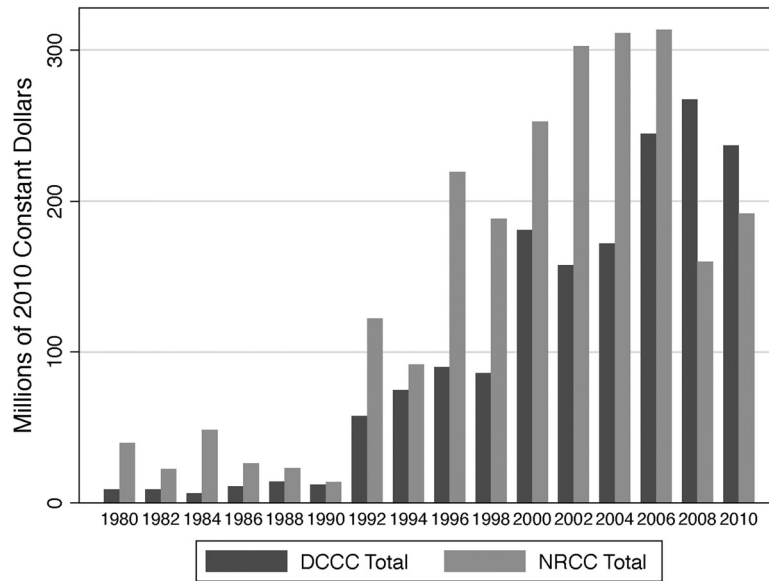
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how candidates are recruited (Jacobson 2013). The stated goal of these new tactics is to maximize the party's probability of gaining or retaining majority control of the House. One by-product of these new developments is that the congressional experience has been critically altered for many members. House elections, once candidate-centered affairs that relied on individual entrepreneurs to emerge, fund, and manage campaigns, now rely at least in part on a party-based system where parties and party organizations play an increased role in candidate recruitment, fundraising, and electoral strategy. Furthermore, once candidates are elected, they are now expected to contribute to the party's fundraising efforts in addition to developing their own campaign war chest. The fundraising requests of the party are an increasingly time-consuming task and take valuable time away from members' legislative responsibilities in Congress. One House member told us that fundraising pressures for members in competitive seats are such that these members, "Have no idea what is going on in Congress."

As we demonstrate in greater detail below, through the usage of coarsened exact matching (CEM), this increased investment of both time and money has led to very little change either in the number of congressional seats that are competitive in a given cycle or the number of seats that shift party control in any given election cycle. For example, from 1980 to 1994 the average number of seats switching parties in a given election was 6.95%. From 1996 to 2010, despite the increased investment, this number actually declined slightly to 6.32%. In fact, the percent of close elections, defined as those decided by less than five percentage points, actually decreased in the more recent time period from 14.11% to 11.78%.

Although a significant body of scholarship focuses on the effects an attainable House majority has on the internal dynamics of the House, there is limited literature on how these changes have influenced actual election outcomes.<sup>2</sup> As each party in each election cycle sees a path to potential gain/loss of majority control in the chamber, the relative value of a marginal gain/loss of a House seat has grown. This has led the party organizations to invest heavily in candidate recruitment and incumbent retention. Both parties have significantly enhanced their candidate recruitment operations and in doing so have increased the amount of fundraising support, both direct and indirect that goes to their chosen candidates (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> The parties have also bolstered support for vulnerable incumbents. Given the increased money, attention, and support bestowed on candidates (especially vulnerable ones) by their parties, the question arises: Does it work? Are vulnerable incumbents safer today than they were pre-1994? Are formerly "safe" seats more at risk for switching party control? In short, the answer for both of these questions is no. The electoral arms race between the two parties has no doubt enriched some political consultants and advertising agencies but in terms of increasing the number of competitive races or electoral turnover, the effect has been minimal at best. House members spend more time than ever raising money, Congress has reached record low approval ratings, and the job satisfaction of the average member seems to have decreased, but congressional seats



**Figure 1.** Party committee expenditures.

are no more likely to flip party control and seats are no more competitive than they were pre-1994.

In sum, our contention in this paper is that the narrow targeting strategies employed by the out-party have not expanded the scope of conflict wide enough to promote a truly competitive battle for majority control. As a result, the net effect of this increased party attention on the competitiveness of House elections has been largely inconsequential in terms of electoral outcomes. When we have seen large seat turnovers, such as in 2006 and 2010, it has been in large part due to national conditions and the unpopularity of an incumbent president weighing down the majority party.

### Pre-1994 Congressional Elections

The role of political parties in the recruitment and support of congressional candidates has varied considerably over the course of US History. Historically, parties played an active role in all aspects of elections and campaigning. Two major reforms fundamentally changed the role of parties in nominations and elections and set the stage for the emergence of candidate-centered elections in the 20th century: the Australian ballot and the direct primary (Carson and Roberts 2013). The Australian ballot made it much easier for voters to cast split-ticket ballots by voting for candidates of more than one party (Rusk 1970). The new ballot created incentives for candidates to develop a personal “brand” that could be

distinct from that of their party and decreased partisan mobilization activities (Engstrom 2012). Similarly, the direct primary made it difficult for party elites to control the identity of their standard bearer. In combination, these two reforms altered the strategic landscape for parties and potential candidates. Lack of control over the identity of candidates made it more difficult and less advantageous for party organizations to recruit congressional candidates. As a result, the proportion of incumbents facing quality challengers plummeted in the wake of these reforms (Carson and Roberts 2013).<sup>4</sup>

For their part, individual candidates had to weigh the opportunity costs of running for office and provide much of their own campaign and fundraising infrastructure. Thus, candidates' decisions to run for office were largely separate from the national party's efforts. While quality candidates' decisions to run for the House coincided with favorable conditions for the national party (Jacobson 1989), recruitment efforts from national parties are largely absent from literature on personal ambitions and the decision to run for Congress in this era. For example, Rohde (1979) presents the decision to run for higher office as being up to individual members. The probability and expected utility of winning are put forward as important factors that influence the decision to run. Not included among those factors that affect the probability of winning are the extent to which running might affect the ability of one's party to control the majority in the lower chamber or any support they might receive from the party in seeking this new office. In the decades following electoral reform, candidate-centered congressional campaigns became the standard (Jacobson 2013). As a result, numerous districts throughout the US would regularly return their incumbent member to the US House while simultaneously voting for the other party's presidential candidate.

In the pre-1994 era, fundraising was also a largely individual endeavor. While some incumbents donated campaign funds to other members in the 1970s and 1980s, this was not viewed as an expectation and the total amount donated consistently fell below five million dollars per election cycle (Wilcox 1989; Heberlig and Larson 2012). Jacobson (1985) argues that one of the reasons for this was that the collective interests of the parties did not coincide with the interests of individual members and as a result, it was difficult to convince members of Congress to contribute to party campaign efforts.

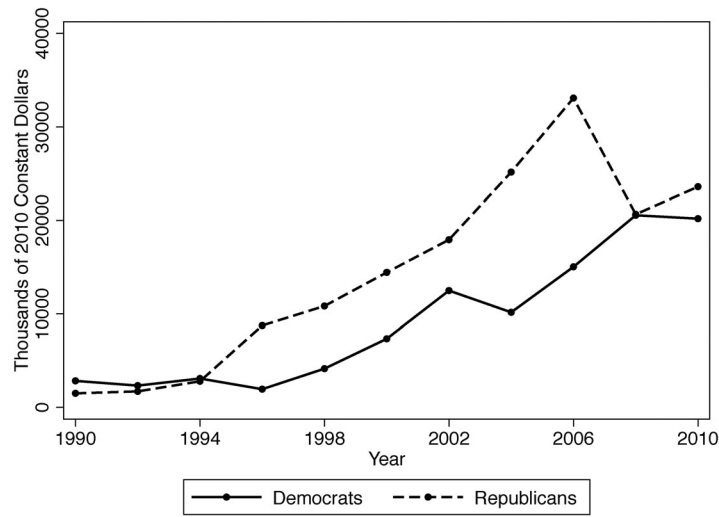
One of the reasons for the persistence of candidate-centered elections was that parties had very little incentive to insert themselves into the process. Throughout this time period, the likely national outcome of House elections was already known long before election night: a Democratic majority of some size would continue to rule in the lower chamber. From, 1958 through 1992 the Republican Party was never even able to cross the 200 seat threshold, much less win a majority of 218 or more. Conventional wisdom suggested that Democratic congressional majorities were likely to persist indefinitely, with several political scientists even asking whether Republicans were "Congress' Permanent Minority" (Connelly and Pitney 1994).

### Post-1994 Congressional Elections

Conventional wisdom was upended when Republicans gained control of the House in 1994 and a new status quo emerged: an ongoing, contentious fight for the House majority. As a result, quality candidates and large amounts of money were now in high demand for both parties as they sought to convert seats to their control all the while maintaining their own vulnerable seats. Extending cartel theory (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005), Heberlig and Larson (2012) argue that fundraising is essential to bolstering the party's reputation. Parties now must raise large sums of money in order to disseminate their message and thus maximize their chance of winning the majority in a given election. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) and the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) dramatically increased their financial involvement in congressional campaigns.<sup>5</sup>

In order to boost their involvement, party committees needed new funding sources. One readily available source was existing caucus members who in most cases had readily available lists of donors. Members of Congress now play a prominent role in helping party leaders redistribute campaign funds to the most competitive races. Members are expected to turn over donor lists after a campaign so that candidates across the country have access to the names of potential donors. With the House majority at stake in every election, members are expected to be directly involved in fundraising even if they hold a "safe" seat themselves. While contribution levels vary between members, contribution strategies for all members have become more party-oriented over time (Heberlig and Larson 2005, 2012). Member contributions to congressional campaign committees surged 82% in 1996, the first cycle after Republicans took control of Congress. As a percentage of all incumbent giving, donations to congressional campaign committees rose from 42% in 1996 to 58% in 2006; in the 2008 cycle Democratic incumbents donated 38.9 million dollars to the DCCC and the Republican incumbents donated 22.8 million dollars to the NRCC. In fact, members now are strongly encouraged to pay party "dues" to these committees from their own campaign funds.<sup>6</sup> In addition, parties have tied advancement opportunities for members in Congress to fundraising. Deering and Wahlbeck (2006) demonstrate that contributions to the NRCC and party unity were significant predictors of selection as a committee chair in the 107th Congress (2001–2002). Similarly, Cann (2008) suggests that campaign contributions and party unity have a variable impact on chair selection. He argues that the transition from seniority to fundraising took place over several congresses; seniority was still dominant in the 105th and 106th Congresses (1995–2000), but party-related factors bypassed seniority in the 107th Congress and remained dominant in subsequent congresses.

Another prominent member-oriented source of fundraising that increased after the 1994 election was leadership political action committees (LPACs) (Cann 2008). As Figure 2 reveals, LPAC contributions to other candidates for Congress have increased dramatically since 1994. Members of Congress use these pots of money to aid other members' bids for reelection, thereby boosting their own clout among their



**Figure 2.** Leadership PAC contributions, 1990–2010.

colleagues and often helping them secure or retain leadership positions or committee chairmanships.

Both parties' congressional campaign committees developed new programs to efficiently steer these new financial resources to the most competitive races. The DCCC uses the "Frontline" program to raise money from its members that can then be used to help vulnerable incumbents, while its "Red to Blue" and "Jumpstart" programs are designed to direct money to competitive seats that are held by Republicans (Heberlig and Larson 2012; Jaffe 2012).<sup>7</sup> These programs formalized the party's role in the recruitment of candidates and encouraged loyal partisans to funnel resources – specifically money – to candidates hand-picked by the party.<sup>8</sup> In addition to offering the candidates financial support, the programs also provide communications and strategic support. The NRCC's program to raise money from members is called "Regain/Retain our Majority Program" (ROMP). Representatives Eric Cantor (R-VA), Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), and Paul Ryan (R-WI) also created a program called "Young Guns" that seeks to recruit and financially support candidates to run in districts currently held by Democrats (Spillius 2010). Although Red to Blue, Jumpstart and Young Guns recruit their candidates in somewhat different ways, both congressional committees created ways for loyal party donors around the country to easily funnel money to the party's preferred candidates.<sup>9</sup>

This new fundraising environment has not improved the quality of congressional life for existing caucus members. Many complain that fundraising for the party is squeezing out other congressional activities. At freshman orientation sessions, new members of the 113th Congress were told to spend approximately four hours out of a nine to ten hour day on "call time" in other words, raising money for themselves

or the party (Grim and Siddiqui 2013). According to former Representative Tom Perriello (D-VA), the suggestion to spend four hours on call time made by the DCCC may have even been “low-balling the figure so as not to scare the new Members too much” (Grim and Siddiqui 2013). Members from both parties expressed antipathy towards the need to spend so much time raising money, with Representative Reid Ribble (R-WI) contending that “there’s no way to make it enjoyable” and Representative John Larson (D-CT) calling the amount of time members needed to devote to fundraising “the most painful thing”.

Some of the newly raised money is used to entice reticent candidates to seek office. Of the many factors Maisel and Stone (1997) indicate as affecting a person’s decision to run, the one that had the highest positive effect was a significant amount of monetary support from the party.<sup>10</sup> Seventy-six percent of potential candidates said, “[s]ignificant financial support from the party would count very heavily toward influencing a run” (86). Strikingly, this percentage was actually higher than that for “open seats”, which was 73% (Maisel and Stone 1997).

Evidence suggests that potential candidates’ concerns about fundraising and party support are not misguided. In 2010 the average House incumbent raised \$1,513,308; whereas the average challenger raised just \$265,338.<sup>11</sup> For challengers, the ability to raise large amounts of money has become a necessary condition for successfully contesting an incumbent held or competitive open seat. In 2010, the average cost of defeating an incumbent was \$1.65 million, up from \$666,000 in 2000 and \$356,000 in 1994. Challengers know that having the support of the party means access to party donors and other crucial resources. According to Brown, Powell, and Wilcox (1995) national party organizations have cultivated an established pool of habitual givers. These donor lists are a party resource that can be used as a tool to entice potential challengers to enter a race and help those challengers win election. Individual donors frequently decide to give money because they are loyal to the party (Ware 1992; Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995). Additionally, if a party asks a loyal partisan to make a donation to a candidate, research shows that the partisan will oblige (Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995; Grant and Rudolph 2002; Francia et al. 2003). Parties and candidates have also been forced to adapt to a rapidly changing legal environment with respect to campaign finance. The Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act of 2002 (BCFR) increased the amount that individuals could donate to a campaign and ended the “soft money” donations to parties that were often used to boost the fortunes of congressional candidates. In addition, both the BCFR and the Supreme Court’s decision in *Citizen’s United v. FEC* (2010) made it much easier outside groups to spend large sums of money on behalf of individual candidates (Herrnson 2009).

If party loyalty partially drives donations, it follows that donors prefer to give to candidates the party endorses. The national committees share their donor list with particular candidates and expect reciprocation. As a result, the same contributors are repeatedly solicited by the party on behalf of the party’s candidates, not just the local representative. In fact, donors to competitive races are likely to be concentrated in a relatively small number of congressional districts nationwide and giving to an equally small number of congressional districts where two-party competition is



fierce (Gimpel, Lee, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2008). In this way, the party organization pays the transaction costs for loyal partisans who wish to give to like-minded candidates. By compiling lists of candidates nationwide that the party supports, citizens who are loyal to the party can easily donate money all over the country, helping to elect loyal partisans. Thus, candidates who are supported by the party are likely to see contributions flow in from all over the country, which likely increases the candidate’s campaign coffers. By analyzing the funding flows in the 2004 election cycle, Gimpel, Lee, and Pearson-Merkowitz (2008) find a preeminent role for party coordination of out-of-district contributions. The party assures donors around the country that their contributions “can make a difference” in particular districts, thereby increasing the party’s chances of regaining or maintaining a congressional majority (Gimpel, Lee, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2008).

The post-1994 competitive environment has undoubtedly caused fundamental changes in how the US House operates internally (e.g. more time members must devote to fundraising for the party), but it is less clear how these changes have influenced the competitiveness of individual House elections as well as the battle for majority control. As stated above, the fundraising arms race between the parties has, in actuality, changed very little with regards to congressional election outcomes. In the next section we analyze the effects of these changes on the competitiveness of individual seats and using summary statistics, regression-based models, and CEM to show that the increased amount of party involvement in elections has not substantively altered the electoral environment.

**Data and Analysis**

We draw on data from all US House elections from 1980 to 2010, which gives us eight election cycles and 3,480 potential cases both before and after the Republican takeover at the outset of the 104th Congress. In Table 1 we present some summary statistics on the two eras of US House elections to see if we can identify changes

**Table 1.** Summary statistics

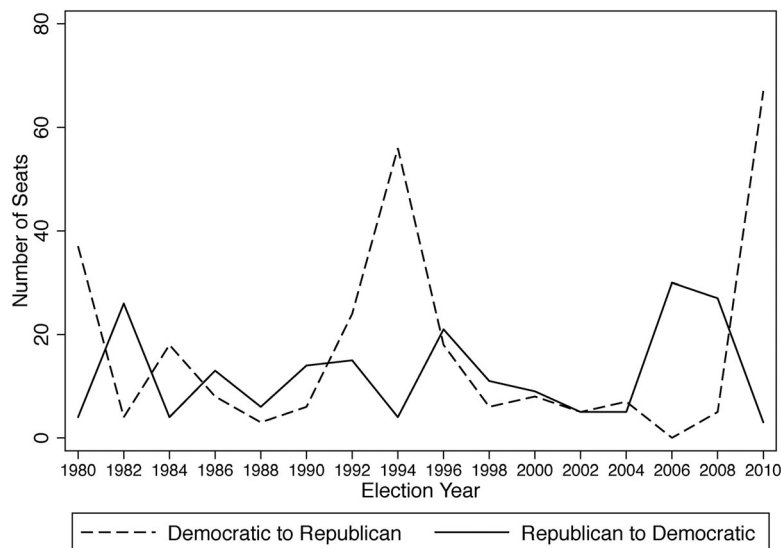
	1980–1994	1996–2010
Incumbent faced quality challenger	14.94	14.97
<b>Close House elections (margin ≤ 5%)</b>	14.11	11.78
Close presidential vote (margin ≤ 5%)	29.65	28.97
Seats shifting party control	6.95	6.32
Close seats shifting party control	17.48	18.69
Uncontested seats	14.17	13.02
<b>Difference between House and presidential vote</b>	12.29	8.24
Number of seats	3480	3480

*Note:* Cell entries are percentages of all seats. Variable names in bold indicate statistically significant difference in means  $p \leq .05$ .

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in competitiveness post-1994. We begin with candidates, as almost all studies of congressional elections agree that recruiting high-quality candidates is a key part of winning seats currently held by the other party (Jacobson 1989). In fact, on average, a quality candidate is three times more likely to defeat an incumbent than is a non-quality candidate.<sup>12</sup> Have the new party programs succeeded in attracting more quality candidates? The data in Table 1 suggest they have not. The percentage of incumbents facing quality challengers is essentially constant across our data series and is too low for a minority party to realistically expect to capture majority control – under normal electoral conditions. The average number of majority party incumbents facing a quality challenger in the post-1994 era is only 37.75. For the entire data series, the win rate for quality candidates facing incumbents is just under 15%. Given the low number of quality challengers and their relatively low success rate it is not surprising that majority control has only changed in nationalized elections. Even in this era of narrow majorities, our data clearly suggest that the out-party is not regularly fielding enough high-quality candidates to give itself a realistic chance of attaining majority control.

Turning to the overall competitiveness of races, we see little evidence that individual elections have become more competitive in the post-1994 era. First, at the individual level, the percentage of elections decided by 5% of the vote or less actually went down in the post-1994 era. As Figure 3 reveals, we see a similar trend at the party level, with the average percentage of seats changing party control in a given election year declining slightly post-1994. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that most of the new efforts put forth by parties and party organizations focus on a



**Figure 3.** Seats shifting party control.

small number of seats that are considered “vulnerable” in any given year. In order to account for this, we next examine those seats that are vulnerable and whether or not they shifted party control. There are many ways to measure vulnerability, but here we code a seat as vulnerable if it was decided by 5% or less of the vote in the previous election. Here we do see some evidence of increased competitiveness, as the percentage of these seats changing hands increased slightly in the post-1994 era, but the magnitude of the change is quite minimal (17.48–18.69%).

The area where we observe the greatest change post-1994 is the correlation between the House vote and the corresponding presidential vote in a given district. As polarization and geographic sorting have increased, the average difference in the vote between a party’s presidential candidate and its House candidate has declined by approximately one-third in the post-1994 era. One could argue that the increasing correlation between the House and presidential vote has made fewer seats “winnable” for the party that does not possess the partisan advantage in the district (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006). The decline in winnable seats could make the illusion of a competitive House a mirage, but a closer look at the data suggest this may not be the case. In the 1980–1994 era, there were an average of 129 congressional districts where the Democratic party’s share of the two-party vote for president was in the 45–55% range. In the 1996–2010 era there were 126 districts within the same range. There has been a slight uptick in the percentage of these seats attracting a quality challenger – 18% pre-1994, 24% post-1994 – but even in this era of heightened competition more than three out of four of these potentially competitive seats do not have a high-quality challenger to an incumbent. This illustrates how the limited focus of party targeting programs limits their effectiveness. It is exceedingly difficult to win a race without an experienced candidate, and potential experienced candidates regularly cite party recruitment as a major factor in deciding whether or not to enter a race (Fox and Lawless 2011).

In terms of spending, the median amount spent by challengers in these races has increased in the post-1994 era, but fewer than 25% of these races feature challengers spending more than \$1 million in 2010 constant dollars. There is some evidence that the number of seats at “high risk” of loss for each party has declined in the past few election cycles, but many holders of these seats face off against inexperienced, underfunded challengers (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006). For an out-party seeking to increase the probability of winning a chamber majority, it is these seats that should be considered for the targeting programs.

Taken as a whole, the results in [Table 1](#) suggest that the increased party involvement in contesting House seats has had a minimal effect, at best, on overall competitiveness both at the individual district level and in the battle for majority control of the House. The percentage of seats changing party control and the percentage of high-quality challengers recruited changed little, if any, in the post-1994 era.<sup>13</sup> One conclusion we could draw from these data is that the new efforts by parties to contest House seats has had no discernible effect. However, it could also be the case that the parties’ efforts are canceling each other out, or that other factors could be

**Table 2.** Party targeting and election outcomes

Variable	Coefficient (Std Err.)			
	1980–1994		1996–2010	
Margin of victory	–0.035*	–0.035*	–0.024	–0.029
	(0.012)	(0.017)	(0.018)	(0.018)
Presidential margin of victory	–0.023	–0.034	–0.024	–0.025
	(0.014)	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.022)
Incumbent in race	–1.066*	–0.950*	–0.981*	–0.949*
	(0.223)	(0.268)	(0.290)	(0.288)
Candidate quality advantage	–0.453*	–0.694*	–0.658*	–0.551*
	(0.159)	(0.091)	(0.211)	(0.219)
Majority seat	0.470*	0.778*	0.911*	0.877*
	(0.175)	(0.218)	(0.239)	(0.246)
Out-party candidate spending	1.743*	1.776*	1.658*	–
	(0.152)	(0.168)	(0.169)	
In-party candidate spending	–0.559*	–0.646*	–1.021*	–
	(0.167)	(0.20)	(0.225)	
District redrawn	0.301	–0.821*	–0.015	0.009
	(0.187)	(0.418)	(0.417)	(0.418)
Midterm year	0.234	0.417*	–0.278	–0.326
	(0.167)	(0.179)	(0.220)	(0.221)
In-party target			0.064	0.017
			(0.320)	(0.321)
Out-party target			2.229*	1.837*
			(0.329)	(0.333)
Out-party total Spending				1.967*
				(0.209)
In-party total spending				–1.348*
				(0.239)
Intercept	–15.955*	–16.029*	–9.490*	–9.26*
	(2.165)	(2.411)	(2.664)	(2.15)
<i>N</i>	2347	2313	2313	2313
Log-likelihood	–471.47	–386.64	–350.94	–333.11
$\chi^2_{(9)}$	279.65	216.09		
$\chi^2_{(11)}$			254.33	238.84

Note: The dependent variable is coded 1 if the given House seat changed party control.

\* $p \leq .05$

counteracting the effects of party involvement in congressional elections. We now turn to multivariate analysis to help answer some of these questions.

In Table 2 we fit four logistic regression models, one for the 1980–1994 time period, and three for the post-1994 era, with the dependent variable coded 1 if a given House seat changed party control. We employ a series of independent variables that are commonly used in models of House elections. The variables include the margin of victory in the previous race, the most recent presidential vote for the

party holding the seat, and indicator variables for an incumbent in the race, a redrawn district, and midterm years. We also construct a measure of candidate quality advantage that is coded 1 if the party in power has an incumbent or quality candidate running against a candidate with no electoral experience, 0 if both parties have quality candidates running, and  $-1$  if the party holding the seat is running a candidate with electoral experience against a quality candidate of the out-party. We also include the natural log of spending by both candidates in 2010 constant dollars and an additional model that includes a measure of the total amount of spending supporting each party's candidate (Herrnson 2009).

We see several interesting results in Table 2.<sup>14</sup> As expected, factors such as the previous vote margin, an incumbent in the race, the quality of the opposing party's candidate, and candidate spending are important predictors of seat change in both time periods. In fact, the most interesting finding from Table 2 is how similar the two time periods are in terms of predicting individual seat turnover. Many of the coefficients are either identical to or indistinguishable from one another across the two models. We computed the predicted probability of seat change across a variety of variables including incumbency, candidate quality, and majority seat status, but found few instances of statistically significant differences across the two time periods and no evidence of a substantively interesting difference.<sup>15</sup>

Given our interest in the effect of the party committees targeting races, we also fit an additional model for the post-1994 period that included indicator variables for whether or not the party committees decided to target the race through one of the various party programs. That is, if the race was listed as a targeted race for the DCCC's "Red to Blue", "Frontline", or "Jumpstart" programs or the NRCC's "ROMP" or "Young Guns", we consider these races to be targeted by the party. Since our dependent variable is whether or not the seat changed party control we coded the targets as either being an "in-party" target in which the party holding the seat was trying to retain it or an "out-party" target in which a party was trying to win a seat that it did not currently hold. Fitting the model with these two additional variables changes our results in several meaningful ways. First, the estimated effect of the previous victory margin is reduced considerably and no longer reaches conventional levels of statistical significance. Second, we find divergent results for the two targeting variables. The coefficient for in-party targeting is substantively small and not statistically significant, while the variable for out-party target appears to be both substantively and statistically significant. For example, holding all else equal, an incumbent held, majority party seat is approximately ten times more likely (0.01 vs. 0.10) to see a change in partisan control if it is targeted by the out-party. We find similar results for open seats. Of course, open seats are more likely to change hands with or without targeting. In fact, fear of losing the upcoming election is often a key factor in why incumbents retire and create an open seat (Stone et al. 2010). We do find that out-party targeting further increases the probability of a change in party control considerably – our estimates indicate that it increases from 0.03 to 0.22. This suggests that the significant resources that have been devoted to targeting these seats may be fruitful for the party organizations. However, we find

no statistical evidence to suggest that in-party targeting helps to shore up vulnerable seats.

One interpretation of the results in [Table 2](#) is that the growing role of party organizations in the recruitment and funding of congressional candidates has transformed the competitiveness of US House elections. Out-party targeting, in particular, is strongly associated with seats changing party control. However, we remain skeptical of this interpretation. As we saw in [Table 1](#), the seat turnover rate has not changed in the era of party targeting. The fact that the previous vote in the district loses statistical significance when we add the targeting variables suggests that the two may be highly correlated. This is in fact the case. The median previous margin of victory for an out-party targeted seat is 5.9% compared to 15.3% for those seats not targeted by the out-party. Thus it seems possible that the party committees are focusing most of their efforts on seats that were relatively close in the previous election and, as a result, likely to be competitive without party targeting efforts.

To more directly assess the effects of targeting on competitiveness we turn to the CEM technique developed by Iacus<sup>12</sup>. CEM allows us to use our entire range of elections (1980–2010) to find cases that are similar to each other except that some receive a treatment – in this case party targeting – while the others do not.<sup>16</sup> Comparing cases that are balanced across the independent variables we employed in [Table 2](#) allows us to more effectively estimate the effect of party targeting on election outcomes. One of the advantages of CEM as opposed to other matching techniques is that we can use our substantive knowledge of congressional elections to coarsen the covariates rather than look for exact matches. Continuous variables such as campaign spending and previous margin of victory can be coarsened without losing substantive information about the cases.<sup>17</sup> We then estimated the effect of out-party targeting on the probability of a seat changing hands using only the matched cases. The results are presented in [Table 3](#).<sup>18</sup> The results show that we still find a positive effect of targeting on the probability of a seat switching. The probability of a seat switching party control increases from 0.29 in non-targeted races to 0.56 in targeted races. This is still a substantively large treatment effect. Party targeting does indeed appear to be strongly associated with the likelihood that a seat will

**Table 3.** Party targeting and election outcomes – CEM results

Variable	Coefficient (Std Err.)
Out-party target	1.17* (0.36)
Intercept	–0.91* (0.21)
<i>N</i>	157
Log-likelihood	–98.05
$\chi^2_{(1)}$	10.59

\* $p \leq .05$

fall into the out-party's control even once we match on factors known to influence election outcomes.

The fact that we see an independent effect of targeting raises the question of why this is the case. We doubt that voters are either aware or influenced by the appearance of a candidate on a target list. We do not have a definite answer as to why targeting independently increases the likelihood of seat turnover but we can offer potential mechanisms. It could be that campaign efforts in these seats are more effective. Candidates in these races likely have access to more experienced campaign consultants and field organizers. A more professional campaign may be more effective at converting campaign dollars to votes. Similarly, targeted races could attract candidates that are of higher quality than other experienced candidates running in non-targeted races. Other potential factors include non-monetary resources such as endorsements and campaign appearances by high-profile party leaders. At this point we simply do not have the data necessary to sort out these and other potential causes.

In some ways our findings are incongruous. The two major parties have devoted increasing resources to seat targeting, and we can demonstrate that seat targeting is effective when employed, yet we still see low levels of seat turnover in the House. What explains this pattern? The main culprit is the choice of seats the party organizations are targeting. The baseline probability of a seat switch in our matching analysis is 0.29, which suggests that approximately one-third of these seats would have switched hands without being targeted by a party organization. Thus the party organizations are devoting the overwhelming majority of their resources to seats that were the most likely to change party control without the influx of new resources. Targeting seems to have made the seats that were already competitive *more* competitive, but has done little to expand the playing field of competitive seats. Each party is able to identify the seats that it should be able to win and target them, with the net effect being very little seat turnover. The lack of more expansive targeting by the out-party is making it likely that narrow majorities will survive from one Congress to the next. By targeting only the most evenly divided districts, the out-party is consigning itself to continued minority status unless it runs the table in these "50–50" districts. This happens sometimes – see 2006 and 2010. However, if targeting is only succeeding at winning seats that are already the most likely to change hands then the overall effect of targeting on competition and the battle for majority control of the chamber is minimal. In this polarized era, this suggests that if parties want to win more seats in order to bolster their chances of being in the majority they need to run as many quality challengers as possible in those seats decided by a relatively narrow margin at the presidential level – thereby attempting to make more seats competitive at the House level and increasing the chance they can attain majority control of the House chamber.<sup>19</sup>

### Discussion and Conclusion

The post-1994 electoral environment in the US House is much different than what was seen in previous decades. Majority parties have held razor thin majorities and

changes in majority control have become more common. Cognizant of the post-1994 reality that the House majority is attainable in every election, party organizations have reasserted themselves by assisting with candidate recruitment and insisting on more collective efforts to raise money by their caucus members. Most members now grudgingly engage in the unhappy task of devoting countless hours to fundraising for their party either out of hope for increased influence or fear of minority status and/or punishment by the party leadership.

It is easy to see how increased party involvement in House elections could enhance the competitiveness of congressional elections. Surprisingly, as we note earlier, more than three out of four seats decided by single digits in the most recent presidential election lack a quality opposite-party challenger to an incumbent. If the out-party was able to increase the number of high-quality candidates seeking office in these districts and could facilitate access to the necessary financial resources more seats could in theory be competitive. Some would argue that increasing the number of districts in which voters are able to choose between two viable candidates is a laudable goal. However, we find no evidence that this is regularly occurring. Rather than expanding the playing field, our results suggests that party organizations are devoting increasing amounts of resources to a small set of races that would be highly competitive even without formal party involvement. These particular races are now hotly contested and the evidence suggests that party targeting is increasing their competitiveness, but the overall level of competition has not been enhanced. Majorities are narrow enough that changes in majority control can happen when the in-party's president is unpopular (see 2006 and 2010), but this has been true for most of American history.

It appears that the only electoral consequence of the increased fundraising is that the cost of winning elections has skyrocketed. Instead of creating a more competitive electoral environment, the American public is left with increased disdain for the amount of money in politics and the rank-and-file party members are left dissatisfied with the focus on fundraising in Congress to the exclusion of other legislative activities. The incentive structure for advancement in the House has become more closely tied to fundraising prowess at the expense other skills such as legislative or policy expertise. As a result, members spend more time fundraising and less time on the other aspects of the job of representative. Given the incentive structure in place, it is little wonder that members decide to pursue other interests and that congressional approval rates continue to set all-time lows.

### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### **Notes**

1. Democrats gained a majority following the 2006 elections. Republicans recaptured the majority following the 2010 elections.



2. The increased fundraising pressure on members has been linked to rising levels of partisanship in Congress (Heberlig, Hetherington, and Larson 2006). In addition, contributions to party fundraising efforts have displaced other concerns such as seniority or descriptive representation when selecting committee chairs (Deering and Wahlbeck 2006; Heberlig and Larson 2007, 2012; Cann 2008). Party fundraising has also become important for those members who want to move up in the extended congressional leadership organization (Heberlig, Hetherington, and Larson 2006; Cann 2008; Heberlig and Larson 2012). It is estimated that more than four hours in a member's day are now spent fundraising for the party (Grim and Siddiqui 2013). Some members have cited this new environment as a contributing factor in their retirement decisions. For example, at his retirement press conference, former Ohio Representative Steve LaTourette expressed his increasing dissatisfaction with the demands of his job in relation to partisanship and fundraising, declaring that, in order to succeed in Congress, a member had to hand over "your voting card and your wallet" to the party (Helderman 2012). LaTourette proclaimed that he was no longer interested in participating in these tasks and thus would not be seeking another term in Congress. Overall, few aspects of how the day-to-day life of members of Congress have been left untouched by the permanent campaign to win or keep the House majority (Heberlig and Larson 2005; Cann 2008; Heberlig and Larson 2012).
3. Figure 1 shows a drop in Republican fundraising support in 2008 and 2010. We expect this decrease is the result of losing majority status and the loss of several party leaders who were instrumental in fundraising (DeLay, Hastert, and Blunt).
4. A quality challenger is defined as a challenger who has previously won an elective office (Jacobson 1989). This is the standard definition used in the US congressional elections literature and has proved to be as effective as other, more nuanced, measures of candidate quality (Carson, Engstrom, and Roberts 2007; Carson and Roberts 2011).
5. The BCFR altered the methods used by party committees to fund congressional elections. The act banned so-called "soft money" or unlimited donations to political party committees. Since the law was enacted the party committees have shifted their focus to independent expenditures on behalf of candidates (Jacobson 2013). Due to these changes we combine all elements of party committee activity in Figure 1.
6. For the 2012 electoral cycle the dues structure for House Democrats ranged from \$200,000 for the most junior members to \$1.5 million for ranking members of exclusive committees to more than \$25 million for Minority Leader Pelosi.
7. Jumpstart began on 9 May 2013 and runs in conjunction with the DCCC's Red to Blue Program. According to DCCC Executive Director Kelly Ward, "The newly created Jumpstart program provides early financial, communications, operational and strategic support to help top-tier candidates get a head start in highly-targeted races" (Isenstadt 2013).
8. In the analysis presented below, we use these party programs and the candidates they choose to support as our measure of whether or not the district is being targeted by a party.
9. Red to Blue, Jumpstart, and Young Guns provide a website for their candidates and an easy way for a donor to contribute to any or all of the candidates. They also make available an email form letter, which they encourage donors to send to their friends asking that they also contribute.
10. Other factors affecting an individual's decision to run included the incumbent's previous vote share, district party balance, the party of the incumbent, and the prospect of success in an election (Maisel et al. 1994).
11. Data drawn from the website [www.opensecrets.org/bigpicture/incumbts.php](http://www.opensecrets.org/bigpicture/incumbts.php).
12. We employ the standard dichotomous challenger quality measure. Candidates who have held previous elective office are considered "quality" others are coded non-quality (Jacobson 1989).
13. The role of redistricting in the development and continuation of an attainable House majority for both parties is less than one might expect. First, there is no reason to suspect that politicians have become more or less likely to draw incumbent-protection maps over time. Second, both in 1994 (for Republicans) and 2006 (for Democrats) majorities were gained despite the other party having somewhat of an advantage in redistricting for that decade. Overall, although we are open to the potential for partisan redistricting to affect the attainability of the House majority post-2010, there is not substantial

evidence to suggest a major role for partisan redistricting in the years covered by our data (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006).

14. We also fit models with incumbent party vote share as the dependent variable. The results were quite similar to what we see in Table 2. We find strong relationship between party targeting and vote share. In particular, targeting by the out-party has a strong negative effect on the incumbent party's vote share – it outweighs the effects of incumbency. It is also worth noting that adding the targeting variables boosts the adjusted  $R^2$  of the vote share models by a considerable margin. These models can be seen in the appendix.
15. For example the predicted probability of a majority held seat with an incumbent running and a non-quality challenger changing hands in 0.009 in the pre-1996 time period and 0.005 post-1994. This difference is statistically significant, but does not suggest that the fundamental dynamics of these races are different in the two time periods.
16. We used out-party targeting as the treatment variable, but find near identical results if we use both parties targeting as the treatment condition.
17. We coarsened previous margin of victory and presidential margin at the following values: 1, 2, 5, 10, 15, 20, and 25. We coarsened the two spending variables at the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles of the data. These parameters return us 111 cases that did not receive party targeting and 46 that were targeted.
18. These results use the candidate spending variables. We also generated results with the total party spending variables and they were virtually identical.
19. As Franklin and Weber (2010) note, the widespread use of the “locality rule” in the USA may limit the base of candidates that parties can recruit from. This may well be true as there are some widely known cases of non-residents successfully seeking Senate seats – Elizabeth Dole (R-NC) and Hillary Clinton (D-NY). There are also examples of candidates running in districts they do not reside in for House races, but with limited success. In Colorado Andrew Romanoff (D) ran and lost in 2014, in Ohio John Bocchieri (D) won in 2008, in Nevada John Ocegüera (D), ran and lost in 2012 and is trying again in 2016, in California Tony Strickland (R), ran in two different seats in 2012 and 2014 and lost both races.

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