

# **Reassessing the Definition of Quality Candidates**

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## Reassessing the Definition of Quality Candidates\*

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Nearly twenty years ago, in discussing strategic decisions made by politicians, Gary Jacobson and Samuel Kernell suggested that “the quality of candidates can be measured by their prior officeholding experience” (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981: 30). This conclusion followed their discussion of the opportunity structure for perspective candidates, a discussion that in itself drew on Joseph Schlesinger’s earlier work on ambition theory (Schlesinger, 1966). Jacobson and Kernell presented evidence that candidates who had previously held elected office fared better in a series of elections in the 1970s than did those without such experience (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981: 31, Table 3.1).

We are uncertain if Jacobson and Kernell’s mention of quality candidates is the first such mention in our literature, but it certainly has set a standard that others have either adopted or upon which they sought to expand. Of course, the best measures of candidate quality are *post hoc*. That is, quality candidates are those who receive a lot of

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votes. Or alternatively, because of the power of incumbents and/or the fact that many districts favor those of one party or another, one could argue that quality candidates are those who can raise enough money to contest an election effectively, even if they do not receive many votes.

The theoretical concept implied in the Jacobson and Kernell operationalization of quality candidates is that those who have held elective office have demonstrated characteristics that prove they are capable politicians, that they have a high probability of meeting one of the thresholds just mentioned. Those characteristics have been defined in various ways over the last two decades, but most definitions come down to some combination of personal traits and campaign skills (see Squire, 1995: 893).

Some have sought to add a level of sophistication to the Jacobson-Kernell measure. For example, Jon Bond, Cary Covington, and Richard Fleisher argued that although candidate quality is essentially a subjective concept, it could be measured using two surrogates, the ability to raise money and political experience. Rather than accepting Jacobson and Kernell's dichotomous treatment of political experience (i.e. either one has held elective office or not), Bond, Covington, and Fleisher create a trichotomous ordinal measure, judging the importance of the previous experience candidates had and including some non-elective experience as well (Bond, Covington, and Fleisher, 1985: 512, 518).

Others have contributed to this debate. Jonathan Krasno and Philip Green argue that an even more sophisticated measure of candidate quality is called for. They attempt to measure "the sum of two traits, attractiveness and political skill" (1988: 922). They operationalize this view of candidate quality by evaluating challengers on a variety of measures including the prestige of the office, currently holding office, having run for the

seat in question previously, celebrity status, and a variety of factors seeking to assess the quality of those not holding office, e.g. professional status, political party activity, holding certain non-elective posts (see also Canon, 1990).

Peeverill Squire suggested that the ability to run a competitive campaign depended on the ability to raise funds and on a set of campaign skills such as public speaking and the ability to organize a campaign staff and volunteers (Squire, 1989: 533). The measure he employed involved a seven-point scale rating the current office held and a variable measuring the overlap between an officeholders current district and the district he or she sought to represent (Squire, 1989; see also Squire 1992).

Most studies of challengers have focused on congressional elections. And most of those studies have relied on the Jacobson-Kernell dichotomous measure of candidate quality. A candidate is deemed to be a high quality candidate if he or she has ever held elective office; absent that qualification, the candidate is deemed not to be a quality candidate. Even those who have attempted to tweak this means of operationalizing quality candidates by making distinctions among offices held or by including other factors have had to concede that the simpler measure performs as well as do any of the more sophisticated ones (see in addition to those mentioned above, Abramowitz, 1988; Stewart, 1989; Squire and Wright, 1990; Lublin, 1994; Segura and Nicholson, 1995; Cox and Katz, 1996; Herrnson, 1998).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This review of measures of candidate quality has benefited from discussions with Jennifer Steen for which we are grateful.

But the commonly used measure remains unsatisfactory from both a theoretical and a practical perspective. From a theoretical perspective the measure is obtained through reasoning that approaches circularity. Quality candidates are those who have been successful in the past, thereby demonstrating their possession of the skills necessary to become a quality candidate. This reasoning might work if one is examining candidates for any particular office, say the United States House of Representatives, but how is it helpful if one goes “down” the hierarchy of offices one step. Again, one could argue that quality candidates for the state legislature are those who have held office before; but that does not really get us very far if our goal is to determine what characteristics define candidate quality. Holding elective office is viewed as a surrogate for having those skills, but there is little recognition in the literature of what those skills are. As Squire says in his essay reviewing this field, “Surprisingly little attention has been given to identifying and measuring these characteristics” (Squire, 1995: 893).

From a practical point of view, previous electoral experience is clearly a variable that itself should hold different weight under different circumstances. While a town councilor who might represent 5000 or 10,000 citizens and a state senator who might represent hundreds of thousands of citizens both hold elective office and both have had to demonstrate certain campaign skills to win those offices, it is difficult to argue that the two experiences qualify the individuals equally as a candidate for the U. S. House of Representatives. Yet that is the logic of the dichotomous variable. If one is interested in looking at candidates for a particular seat, the Jacobson-Kernell measure identifies too many who might be qualified candidates and does not distinguish among them. Furthermore, the measure fails to distinguish among the non-officeholders seeking office.

We know that many non-officeholders have won seats in the Congress in recent elections. A more useful measure of candidate quality should be able not only to note that officeholders on average are better candidates than none officeholders, but it should also be able distinguish among officeholders and among non-officeholders in terms of candidate quality. In this paper, we hope to unravel some of the component parts of the measures commonly used to judge quality candidates.

Before proceeding, we should note that measures are not necessarily intrinsically good or bad; rather a measure should be judged by whether or not it is useful and appropriate for the need for which it was devised. And in that sense, the dichotomous political experience variable and its various elaborations have served our research community well. However, the concept of candidate quality itself is inherently interesting. Thus, as Squire (1995: 893) noted, it is somewhat surprising that the concept has not received more scholarly attention.

Like others who have dealt with this concept, we came to examine candidate quality not as an end in itself, but as a means to a somewhat different research end. The goal of the Candidate Emergence Study is to explore the decision making process followed by potential candidates for office. To achieve that goal, we had to identify potential candidates and then we had to explore how they reached decisions about their potential candidacy. An ancillary benefit of this study has been this examination of the factors that distinguish among those who are considered strong candidates by other political elite and which distinguish those who are considered strong candidates from those who are not considered as strong. Thus, before proceeding to a discussion of candidate qualities, it is necessary to review our study design.

## **I. The Candidate Emergence Study**

In order to identify a group of potential candidates for the U. S. House of Representatives, we surveyed a positional elite in a random sample of 200 congressional districts.<sup>2</sup> Our goal was to select ten Democrats and ten Republicans in each district. We sampled from delegates to the two parties' 1996 national nominating conventions and from county chairs. If we could not reach our goal of ten from each party in a district using those populations, we sampled from the delegates to the 1992 conventions.<sup>3</sup>

Our purpose was to use these respondents as informants about their congressional districts. Our reasoning was that convention delegates and county chairs are likely to be knowledgeable about the politics of their districts without themselves being likely candidates. We had tested this technique in an exploratory study with encouraging results (Maisel and Stone, 1997). In this survey we asked respondents to answer questions regarding the district and the incumbent in the district. We also asked them to suggest up to four individuals who, in their estimation, would be "potentially strong candidates for the U. S. House," regardless of whether those candidates had ever shown an interest in running and/or whether they had every been mentioned as possible candidates. We then asked the respondents to answer a battery of questions concerning

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<sup>2</sup> Our research design is spelled out in greater detail in Stone, Maisel, and Maestas (1998).

<sup>3</sup> Our total pool of usable informants was 3573. We mailed to each informant up to three times. Our total response rate for the survey was 43%. See Stone, Maisel, and Maestas, 1998: footnotes 9 and 10.

the characteristics of those whom they considered to be potentially strong candidates. Based on these questions, and on the other questions that deal with the characteristics of the district, we can determine those characteristics that these political informants view as important in determining candidate quality.

As a second stage in our research we polled the potential candidates named by our informants and all of the state legislators whose districts overlapped in sum or in part with our sampled congressional districts. We supplemented our informant-identified potential candidates with state legislators for two reasons. First, more candidates for the U. S. House come from state legislatures than from any other single source; second, most state legislators do not in fact run for the House, and thus we were guaranteed variance on the key dependent variable for our study, the decision to run for the House.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> We mailed 3640 surveys, 1399 to potential candidates named in our Informant survey and 2241 to state legislators whose districts overlapped the sampled congressional districts but who were not named in our Informant survey. Our response rate for this survey, again with reminder mailings sent and those responses included, was 33%. The response rate was approximately the same for named potential candidates as it was for state legislators who had not been named by our informants.

For analytical purposes, we have created two datasets from this survey. The first is a dataset that includes the answers from all of the named potential candidates. We have merged these data with responses from the informants who named each individual as a potential candidate. The second dataset includes the responses from all of the state legislators, whether they were named potential candidates or not. One advantage of our design is that, while we polled all state legislators whose districts overlapped with the 200 congressional districts in our sample, we were able to distinguish among the respondents by whether or not our informants had identified them as strong potential candidates. Thus, we expected a good deal of variance in terms of candidate strength among this group.



With this survey we asked the respondents to evaluate themselves on the same battery of questions that we had asked the Informants. Thus, using the Candidate Emergence Study data we can get a reading on candidate quality from two different perspectives—that of a sample of the political elite in a congressional district and that of those thought to be potential candidates for office. We can also examine how the evaluations of state legislators (and those holding other elective offices) vary from those who were named as potentially strong candidates from office but who did not hold political office.<sup>5</sup>

## **II. Assessing the Quality of the Informants' Choices**

Respondents to our first survey were asked to identify potentially strong candidates for the Congress. The success of our study rests on the ability of these informants to identify

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In the analysis and discussion below, these datasets will be referred to as the Named Potential Candidates and the State Legislators. It should be noted that named state legislators are included in both datasets. Because of the difference in the two ways in which we identified our potential candidate pool, the entire dataset is never treated as a single unit.

<sup>5</sup> We cannot, however, examine the qualities attributed to those who might have held elective political office in the past but did not do so at the time of our survey, because we did not include that question in our survey. It should be noted, however, that the number who would fit in this category was likely to be small. In addition, though the Jacobson-Kernell measure includes those who formerly held elective office, this inclusion also leads to distortion in the measure, as no consideration is given to time frame.

potential candidates who would in fact be strong candidates. Further, of course, our ability to analyze the decision making of these potential candidates rested on the assumption that some of those identified as potentially strong candidates would in fact run for office, some would consider doing so but decide against running, and others would not even consider running. That is, we needed variance on the dependent variable, the decision to run for the House.

To explore candidate decision making further, we asked our informants to rate each of their potential candidates on a measure of how likely they were to run in 1998, how likely they would be to win the nomination in 1998 if they ran, and how likely they would be to win the election if they won the nomination. We also asked how likely the informants thought the possibility that the potential candidate named would run within the next ten years.

If our informants were in fact as knowledgeable about their districts as we hoped, they should have identified for us those candidates who did in fact run in 1998 and who did well. Table 1 presents data to confirm this view.<sup>6</sup> We judged candidates in 1998 to have been strong candidates if they polled at least 40 percent of the vote, if they raised at least three-quarters of the money raised by the incumbent (or the other candidate in an

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<sup>6</sup> At a later point we will be able to identify all of the named potential candidates who did in fact run in 1998 and to test the informants' abilities to rate their chances. Those data have not yet been entered into our dataset. Of course, we would not have identified many of those who ran in 1998 as potentially strong candidates, because many of those who ran were in fact weak candidates—and thus our informants should not have identified them.

open seat) in their district, or if they did both.<sup>7</sup> Our informants identified 16 of the twenty-six candidates who met both criteria, 16 of the 29 who polled more than 40% but did not raise three-quarters of the amount raised by the incumbent, and four of the seven who raised enough money to qualify but did not poll enough votes. It is somewhat difficult to know how to interpret these results. One measure of the success of our informants in identifying qualified candidates is the fact that they identified all save two of the elected officeholders who in fact polled well or raised enough money to run significant campaigns in 1998; sole reliance on previous experience would have identified sixteen fewer potential candidates who turned out to run effective campaigns. To state it another way, our informants identified approximately 60% of the candidates who eventually ran credible campaigns. The more frequently used method of looking at those who were holding or had held elective office would have identified less than 30%. And, of course, the informants identified far fewer who did not run or who ran but did not fare well than would have been the case if we had defined our universe as all of those who had held elective office.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> We chose these criteria as providing evidence that the candidate ran a credible campaign. Our view is that a healthy democracy depends on the existence of campaigns in which more than one candidate can express views on the issues of the day to the electorate, thus providing the electorate with a meaningful choice. Winning, or even coming close to winning, is not essential for a strong candidacy defined in this way. See Maisel and Stone, 1997; Stone, Maisel, Maestas, and Evans, 1998; Steen, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> If we had used a more demanding test, say 45% of the vote, our informants still would have identified approximately 60% of those who reached the standard in our sample of districts; but the number such candidates who would have been identified by the standard of electoral experience would have risen

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Table 1 about here

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While this measure is admittedly crude, it does give us confidence in the views of our informants. Another way to judge the accuracy of their views is to look at the elected officials who responded to our second survey. In this case, our test is whether those elected officials who were identified by our informants rated themselves higher as potential candidates than did elected officials responding to our survey who were not named by our informants.<sup>9</sup> The test we used was a simple one. Potential candidates were asked to rate the chances that they would run at some point in the future, the chances that they would win the nomination if they ran, and the chances that they would win the general election if they won the nomination. We then computed a conditional probability of the potential candidate's self assessment that they would win a future election. That probability was computed:  $p(\text{win in future}) = p(\text{win nomination if run}) * p(\text{win election if nominated})$ . The correlation between self-assessment of winning if a potential candidate were to run at some time in the future and having been named by an informant (as opposed to having been added to our pool of potential candidates by virtue

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to 35%. Of course, those who use the traditional criterion for candidate quality, successful experience in running for elective office, use that measure as a means to distinguish among candidates who do in fact run, not to predict which candidates who might run would be strong contenders.

<sup>9</sup> The only elected officials responding to our survey who were not named by our informants were state legislators who were added to the potential candidate pool.

of holding a seat in a state legislature) was .24, significant at the .01 level. Again the appropriate criteria for measuring our informants' success in naming strong candidates for the House are unclear, but we are encouraged by this finding.<sup>10</sup>

### **III. Qualified Candidates from the Candidate Emergence Study**

We turn now to definitions of candidate quality developed from our study and an assessment of the qualities that lead candidates to be judged as qualified, either by our informants or by the potential candidates themselves.

**Dependent variables.** Our goal is to determine what criteria our informants and our potential candidates employed in judging who would and would not be a strong potential candidate for the House of Representatives.

From the Informant Survey, two answers seemed to judge candidate strength. The first was a simple question in which the informant was asked to judge the overall strength of each potential candidate he or she was suggesting, on a seven-point scale ranging from extremely strong to extremely weak. In some ways use of this variable is problematic. Because we asked the informants to identify those we would be potentially

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<sup>10</sup> We should note that we also asked those in our potential candidate pool to assess their chances of running, being nominated if they ran, and winning the general election if they were nominated in 1998. Thus we were able to compute a conditional probability of winning in 1998 by a similar means as we used for the future probability. Because the self-assessment of the potential candidates regarding their chances in 1998 were so skewed toward the low end of the scale, we rely on the future probability of winning as a better indicator of their self-assessment of their strength at this point.

strong candidates for office, if informant assessment of overall strength as the dependent variable, we are essentially using the selection criterion as the dependent variable. At the logical extreme, if our informants did a very good job, there should be no variance on the dependent variable—because they had been asked to identify strong potential candidates. In point of fact, however, our informants did note differences in strengths among the potential candidates they named, so we have used their overall assessment, with the reservations noted.

The second variable we identified was similar to the conditional probability discussed above. However, on the Informant Survey we only asked about the potential candidate's likely chances of winning the nomination and the general election in 1998. Using these questions we computed a conditional probability of the chances that the informant thought the named potential candidate would run and win in 1998. Our informants judged that most potential candidates were unlikely to win the general election in 1998. They rated the chances that the incumbent would win reelection at .80 while the chances that the named potential candidate would win reelection was only .27.

From the Potential Candidate Survey, we identified three possible measures of strength of potential candidacy. The first was a question parallel to the one mentioned above in which the potential candidates were asked to assess their overall strength. We felt it less appropriate to rely on this measure than on the similar measure used for the Informant Survey, in part because potential candidates might be self-effacing or, to the contrary, might inflate their own strengths. That is, we do not view the reliability of the variable as high.

We used the series of questions regarding the potential candidates' likelihood of running, winning the nomination, and winning the election if nominated in 1998 on this survey, just as we did on the Informant Survey. As noted in Section II above, we computed a conditional probability. In this case the potential candidates assessed the incumbents' chances as even higher and theirs as even lower than did the informants—.92 for the incumbents' chance of winning the election if they ran as opposed to .15 for their own.

On the Potential Candidate Survey, also as noted above, we asked a series of questions about the potential candidates' likelihood of running, winning the nomination, and winning the election if nominated in the foreseeable future. Again, we computed conditional probabilities using the responses to these questions. In this case the mean response was .38. While many of the respondents felt that they were unlikely or extremely unlikely to win either the nomination or the general election in the foreseeable future (and thus their conditional probability of being elected was very low), others felt that their chances to win both were strong. Thus we had a good deal of variance on this measure of strength. As we believe that this variable measures candidate strength in a way that is more meaningful than the probability of winning in 1998, we use it to identify factors that contributed to challenger quality as assessed by the potential candidates themselves.

**Independent variables.** The Informant Survey asked a battery of questions on which the respondent was asked to judge the potential candidates on a series of qualities. Some of these were qualities that would contribute directly to a candidate's potential as a

candidate: name recognition, ability to raise money, ability to fund one's own campaign; potential for support from voters in the district in the potential candidate's party; potential for support from voters in the district not in the potential candidate's party; potential support from the potential candidate's political party; previous experience in government; potential support from interest groups. Other qualities were less directly political: personal integrity; the ability to find solutions for problems; the ability to work well with other political leaders; public speaking abilities; dedication to serving the public; ambition to hold office; and grasp of the issues. In addition, we asked the informants to rate the district on an ideological scale from extremely conservative to extremely liberal, and we asked the respondents to rate the potential candidates on the same scale; thus, we were able to compute a measure of ideological proximity of the potential candidate to the district.

On the Potential Candidate Survey we asked a battery of questions similar to those noted above. We were able to compute both an ideological proximity measure and a partisan proximity measure.

Factor analysis of the qualities in the battery of questions about potential candidate characteristics suggest two distinct dimensions, a dimension that measures political or strategic resources (with slightly different components for the two surveys, but the same variables formed the factor for each of the two datasets derived from the Potential Candidate Survey) and a dimension that measures personal qualities (again with



slightly different components for the two surveys but the same for the two datasets from the PC Survey) (Stone, Maisel and Maestas, 1998).<sup>11</sup>

In addition, on the Potential Candidate Survey we asked a number of questions about offices that might be held by a respondent. As a result we can examine some factors that might contribute to the strength of those currently holding office that do not contribute to those not holding office and that also might be able to help us identify characteristics that allow us to distinguish among office holders as potentially strong candidates. Among those factors were the overlap between the district currently served and the congressional district; whether the position was full- or part-time, length of current service, whether or not the potential candidate is in a leadership position in his or

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<sup>11</sup> A third dimension, identified as support from outside the district, emerged from the Informant Survey, and a third dimension, identified as political ambition, emerged from the Potential Candidate Survey. Neither of these is used in this analysis because they are conceptually distinct from the resource variables in which we have interest.

Items loading into the strategic quality factor include: the ability to fund one's own campaign; the ability to raise money to fund the campaign; and name recognition in the district on the Potential Candidate Survey and these same items plus potential for support from own party outside the district and potential support from interest groups on the Informant Survey. Items loading with the personal quality dimension include: the ability to find solutions to problems; the ability to work well with other leaders; the dedication to public service; and public speaking abilities on the Potential Candidate Survey, and these same factors plus personal integrity and grasp of the issues on the Informant Survey. The factor analysis is available upon request.

This paper and other recent products of the Candidate Emergence Study can be accessed on our website, <http://www.socsci.colorado.edu/CES/home.html>.

her current office, the difficulty in winning the office currently held, the prestige of the office currently held, the professionalism of the legislature if the officeholder was a state legislator, and the opportunities that that office provides for seeking other offices.

#### **IV. Analysis**

We begin our analysis by examining the correlations between the four dependent variables that we have identified and the various independent variables. For the Informant Survey, these findings are presented in Table 2.

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Table 2 about here

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From Table 2, it is clear that there is a strong and highly significant relationship between each of the candidate characteristic and each of the candidate resource variables that we identified and the dependent variable, the overall strength of the potential candidate as judged by the informant.<sup>12</sup> There is a weaker relationship between the ideological proximity between the potential candidate and voters in his own party. The relationship between the candidate holding a political office and the strength of candidacy

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<sup>12</sup> The three ideological proximity variables reported in the table are the absolute value of the difference between the informants' rating of the potential candidate and of the district's voters on a seven-point scale from extremely liberal to extremely conservative.

is also less strong than the others.<sup>13</sup> Finally the remaining two ideological proximity variables proved not to be statistically significant.

The correlations are not as strong when one examines the conditional probability of winning election as the dependent variable, but they are in the same directions. In this case the variable indicating whether or not the potential candidate holds an elective office proves not to be significant. We added the variable in which the informant assessed the overall strength of the potential candidate to this matrix. It is highly correlated with the probability that the candidate would win if he or she ran in 1998. Again, we explore this relationship further below.

Table 3 presents parallel findings for the dependent variables used with the Potential Candidate Survey.<sup>14</sup> We do not use the potential candidates' own assessments

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<sup>13</sup> Obviously given the frequency with which elective office is used as a surrogate for a qualified candidate, this finding is somewhat surprising. One possible explanation is that our informants see holding office as less an advantage in and of itself—as opposed to as an indicator that a candidate has the ability to raise the money, structure an organization, etc. to run a strong campaign. This will be discussed in more detail below.

<sup>14</sup> The measure of partisan proximity between the potential candidate and the voters in the district is derived by using questions on party identification, measured on the familiar seven-point scale.

of their own overall strength as a dependent variable because we feel that personal bias would enter even more at that point than others.<sup>15</sup>

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Table 3 about here

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While the correlations are not so strong as they were when we examined the Informant Survey, most of them remain significant and in the expected direction. Generally the correlations are slightly stronger when we examine the question of the probability of winning sometime in the future than they are for the election of 1998.. The two notable exceptions are the variable relating to name recognition, presumably because that could be built before some future campaign, and the variable relating to funding one's own campaign, where the relationship fails to reach the .05 level of significance when a future campaign is contemplated for the State Legislators dataset. Generally, as well, the correlations are higher for the Named PCs than they are for the State Legislators. .

It is clear from our earlier analyses that some of these variables are related to each other. Further, we want to explore the independent contributions that each makes to assessments of challenger quality. When we used all of the independent variables in a regression to demonstrate their contribution to the assessment of candidate strength

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<sup>15</sup> When we ran those correlations, they were extremely strong and significant, all in the expected direction with the exceptions of the partisan and ideological proximities, which were significant, but less strong, and in the opposite direction from that we would have hypothesized.

(results not shown) the model for overall strength of the potential candidate (using the Informant Survey) was the only one of the four attempted in which many of the individual variables included reached statistical significance. Thus, we determined that it would be more salutary to consider the dimensions of candidate quality that emerged from the factor analysis of these variables (recall footnote 10). The results are found in Tables 4 (for the Informant Survey) and 5 (for the Named Potential Candidates) below.

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Tables 4 and 5 about here

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Each of these models tells an interesting story. Some clear patterns begin to emerge. First, strategic qualities are very important as our informants judge candidate quality. This factor is particularly true when the informants looked at prospects for the election immediately on the horizon. When the criterion for candidate quality was the more general notion of overall assessment of candidate strength, strategic qualities remained most important, but the personal quality dimension emerged as a significant contributor to explaining variance in the dependent variable as well. In each case previous experience in government, when separated as a factor from the strategic resources that are thought to exist for someone with that experience, nearly dropped out. That is not to argue that previous experience is unimportant, but rather that its effect seems to be indirect, mediated through the other factors. In the model for the assessment of electoral chances in 1998, previous electoral experience as a contributor did not reach

the .05 level of significance. While it did reach statistical significance in the more general model, its influence was decidedly less than either of the other two factors.<sup>16</sup>

In viewing data from the Named Potential Candidate dataset from the Potential Candidate Survey, two additional variables have been added to the model, because they contributed to different dimensions as we viewed candidate characteristics and resources. Again it is clear from these models that merely holding elective office does not have a direct effect independent of the other variables examined. Two other aspects of these models stand out. First, as these potential candidates look toward the future, personal qualities seem to be more important in assessing their chances of eventual success than are strategic qualities. In addition, support from the national party, which likely is a reflection of the party's willingness to contribute money to future campaigns, is viewed as contributing to these potential candidates' assessments of their chances of winning future campaigns, while support for interest groups does not reach statistical significance—and in the short-term model is signed negatively.

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Table 5 about here

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Finally, we turn to the State Legislators dataset from the Potential Candidate Survey. Recall that this dataset includes all state legislators who responded to the survey,

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<sup>16</sup> When models were run (not shown) in which all of the various factors were included individually, previous experience failed to achieve statistical significance using either of the two dependent variables.

both those who were named by our informants and those who were added to our pool because of the position they hold.

For this analysis, by definition, all of the respondents hold elective office. The question to which we turn deals with whether it is possible to distinguish among elected officeholders in a way that permits us to judge which among them would be stronger candidates for the House of Representatives. The models are presented in Table 6.

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Table 6 about here

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Note the differences between the two models. For assessing the conditional probability that any state legislator would win the 1998 election, strategic qualities (the variable comprised of name recognition, ability to raise money for a campaign, and the ability to fund one's own campaign), potential support from the national party (another measure of the ability to raise money) and extent of overlap between the legislator's current district and the target congressional district are the only variables that reach statistical significance.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that a number of independent variables that we thought might well be important in assessing potential candidate quality correlate strongly with each other. For instance, whether a legislature was full- or part-time and whether or not it was deemed a professional legislature (on the scale developed by Peverill Squire) each correlate strongly with our measure of overlap between the legislative district and the congressional district. This reflects the fact that most—though not all—of the professional legislatures (which tend to be full-time legislatures) are in larger states in which the overlap between state legislative districts and congressional districts is larger. Other variables, such as whether or not the

When one turns to a long-term view of electoral viability, however, a very different picture emerges. In the second model, the strategic qualities fail to achieve statistical significance. However, personal qualities do as do the potential support from the party outside of the district, the overlap variable, and the opportunities that the current office holds for aiding in future political endeavors. The length of service in the state legislature is significant and negative; that is, longer state legislative service contributes negatively to perceived chances of winning in the foreseeable future.

## **V. Discussion**

This paper has permitted us to reach a number of important conclusions considering how we assess quality candidates in congressional elections. First, we have demonstrated that a reputational technique, particularly if supplemented by a positional approach, allows scholars to identify potentially strong candidates for the House of Representatives in advance of an election cycle. Reliance on the opinions of political leaders leads to the early identification of approximately twice as many of the candidates who eventually performed well in the general election that does reliance solely on previous electoral success. While more work remains to be done in this area, e.g. analyzing those candidates who performed well but were not identified by either technique, this ability to

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legislator held a leadership position, proved not to be significant. The existence or non-existence of term limits in a state affects the likelihood that a state legislator would run for the House of Representatives, but not the strength of that candidacy.



identify strong potential candidates early contributes to our understanding of the electoral process and can be beneficial for future research.

Second, we have been able to identify specific characteristics of potential candidates that are viewed as contributing to their chances for eventual electoral success. Acknowledging that having previously won elective office is important, we can see that the effect is an indirect one, reflecting other important qualities. In the short-run, the important factors tend to be strategic factors, those often associated with the ability to win an election. Included in this assessment are name recognition, the ability to raise money, and the ability to fund one's own campaign. But in the long-run, or when one examines informants' assessment of overall candidate strength, other factors enter the equation as important contributors. Personal qualities such as the ability to solve problems, the ability to work with other legislative leaders, the grasp that a potential candidate has on the issues, and the potential candidate's dedication to public service become important. That is not to say that strategic qualities are ignored, but the assessment seems to be that quality potential candidates can be identified by strength of personal character and that the other, more blatantly political qualities, can follow.

The important of support from a potential candidate's political party outside of the district also emerges as an important contribution factor in the assessment of probability of winning a general election. The role of organized political party emerged much more strongly in this analysis than we had anticipated.

Finally, we have been able to identify factors that allow an analyst to distinguish among officeholders as potentially strong candidates for office. Though the timeframe one is considering is important, one key factor, easily operationalized in advance of an

election, cannot be ignored. Whether one is considering state legislators or all elected office holders (analysis not shown), and whether one is considering short-time chances for success or the chances for success in the foreseeable future, the extent of overlap between a potential candidate's current district and the target congressional district contributes more than any other single factor to assessment of candidates' chances of winning.

That conclusion is not surprising. What it essentially says is that any elective office is not the same as any other elective office. If one wants to examine quality candidates, one should filter elected office holders by the extent to which they already represent the congressional district in which they will be running. Once one had done this, in the short-run, office holders are distinguished from one another as stronger or less strong potential candidates by strategic qualities, name recognition and various measures of their ability to raise money. In the long-run the distinguishing factors are less related to immediate strategic needs but rather to personal qualities and the ability to take advantage of a current position to build for a future race.

Of course, assessments of chances of winning, in whatever timeframe, are only one element in the decision to run for elective office. These findings are encouraging for those who are concerned with finding quality candidates to run who might turn into quality legislators. But much more work remains to be done to come to an understanding of how those deemed to be high quality potential candidates decide whether or not to seek seats in the House of Representatives.



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**Table 1.**  
**Quality Candidates in 1998 General Election**  
(sampled congressional districts)

<b>Identified as Potential Candidates for our survey</b>	<b>59.7%</b>
<b>Non-elected potential candidates identified by Informants</b>	32.3%
<b>Elected officials Identified by Informants</b>	25.8%
<b>State Legislator not identified by Informants</b>	1.7%
<b>Identified by method of noting electoral success</b>	<b>29.0% *</b>
<b>Not identified by either method</b>	<b>38.7%</b>
<b>Total n =</b> 62	

\* All save one of the potential candidates identified in this way were identified by one or more of our Informants..

**Table 2. Correlations with Measures of Candidate S  
Informant Survey**

<b>Candidate characteristics or qualities</b>	<b>Overall strength<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>Conditional probab PC would win<sup>c</sup></b>
<b>Strategic Variables</b>		
PC holds elective office	.142 **	-.018
PC's name recognition	.499 **	.348 **
PC's ability to raise money	.575 **	.318 **
PC's ability to fund own campaign	.306 **	.210 **
PC's support from members of own party	.606 **	.308 **
PC's potential support from the party outside the district	.568 **	.296 **
PC's support from members of the opposing party	.506 **	.343 **
PC's potential support from interest groups	.637 **	.293 **
Strategic variable dimension of factor analysis	.689 **	.396 **
<b>Personal Variables</b>		
PC's personal integrity	.433 **	.187 **
PC's ability to find solutions to problems	.555 **	.230 **
PC's ability to work with other political leaders	.548 **	.239 **
PC's public speaking ability	.475 **	.187 **
PC's dedication to public service	.510 **	.205 **
PC's grasp of the issues	.548 **	.200 **
Personal quality dimension of factor analysis	.623 **	.255 **
<b>Other Variables</b>		

PC's previous experience in government	.491 **	.203 **
Proximity of PC's ideology to that of the district's voters	-.024	.016
Proximity of PC's ideology to that of voters in own party	.062 **	.075 **
Proximity of PC's ideolgoy to that of voters in the opposing party	.013	-.039
Overall assessment of PC's strength	-	.411 **
lowest n =	1997	1799

\*\* = p < .01

<sup>a</sup> Cell entries are Pearson Correlations of the various independent variables with the cited dependent variables.

<sup>b</sup> Question asked the Informant to judge the PC's overall strength in the district.

<sup>c</sup> Variable is the conditional probability (PC will win primary) \* (PC will win general election if wins primary)



**Table 3. Correlations with Measures of Candidate Strength  
Potential Candidate Survey**

	Conditional probability that PC would win in 1998 <sup>b</sup>		Conditional probability that PC would win future elec	
	Named PCs	State Legislators	Named PCs	State Legislators
<b>Strategic Variables</b>				
PC holds elective office	.050	na	.052	na
PC's name recognition	.246 **	.185 **	.195 **	.067
PC's ability to raise money	.225 **	.183 **	.302 **	.201 **
PC's ability to fund own campaign	.153 **	.112 **	.159 **	.031
PC's support from members of own party	.250 **	.165 **	.373 **	.178 **
PC's potential support from the party outside the district	.205 **	.172 **	.314 **	.271 **
PC's support from members of the opposing party	.191 **	.093 *	.194 **	.063
PC's potential support from interest groups	.078	.083 *	.211 **	.209 **
Strategic variable dimension of factor analysis	.267 **	.206 **	.278 **	.122 **
<b>Personal Variables</b>				
PC's ability to find solutions to problems	.102 *	.153 **	.212 **	.199 **
PC's ability to work with other political leaders	.128 *	.106 **	.209 **	.152 **
PC's public speaking ability	.123 *	.150 **	.147 **	.233 **
PC's dedication to public service	.099	.064	.112 *	.096 **
Personal quality dimension of factor analysis	.167 **	.168 **	.252 **	.243 **

**Other Variables**

Proximity of PC's partisanship to that of the district's voters	-0.008	.003	-.127 *	-.091 *
Proximity of PC's ideology to that of the district's voters	-.122 *	-.094 *	-.135 *	-.114 **
Overall assessment of PC's strength	.282 **	.224 **	.394 **	.248 **
lowest n =	346	658	333	640

\*\* = p < .01, \* = p < .05

<sup>a</sup> Cell entries are Pearson Correlations of the various independent variables with the cited dependent variables.

<sup>b</sup> Variable is the conditional probability (PC will win '98 primary) \* (PC will win '98 general election if wins primary)

<sup>c</sup> Variable is the conditional probability (PC will win future primary) \* (PC will win future general election if wins primary)

**Table 4.**  
**Contributors to Assessment of Candidate Quality:**  
**Informant Survey**

	<b>Assessing overall Strength of Candidacy</b>		<b>Assessing probability of winning 1998 election</b>	
	<b>b</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>Beta</b>
<b>Strategic qualities</b>	.570**	.470	.095**	.347
<b>Personal qualities</b>	.462**	.378	.026**	.096
<b>Previous experience in government</b>	.099**	.131	.003	.017
Intercept		-.705		-.380
Adjusted R square		.625		.164
F		1133.381**		118.833**
N		2045		1824

\*\* p < .01

**Table 5.**  
**Contributors to Assessment of Candidate Quality:**  
**Named Potential Candidates**

	Assessing probability of winning 1998 election		Assessing probability of winning future election	
	b	Beta	b	Beta
<b>Strategic qualities</b>	.051**	.246	.032 *	.136
<b>Personal qualities</b>	.034	.071	.078 **	.149
<b>Elected officeholder</b>	-.004	-.007	.017	..030
<b>Potential support from national party</b>	.024*	.150	.038 **	.215
<b>Potential support from interest groups</b>	-.018	-.110	.006	.031
Intercept		-.256		-.383
Adjusted R square		.083		.131
F		6.844**		10.333**
N		323		311

\*\* p < .01, \* p < .05

**Table 6.**  
**Assessment of Candidate Quality:**  
**State Legislators**

	Assessing probability of winning 1998 election		Assessing probability of winning future election	
	<b>b</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>Beta</b>
<b>Strategic qualities</b>	.028**	.136	.000	.000
<b>Personal qualities</b>	.024	.065	.054**	.123
<b>Potential support from national party</b>	.015*	.105	.030**	.180
<b>Overlap between legislative district and CD</b>	.035**	.178	.062**	.267
<b>Opportunities that current office holds for future</b>	.001	.009	.028**	.138
<b>Length of state legislative service</b>	.010	.074	*	-.076
Intercept		-.321		-.352
Adjusted R square		.097		.182
F		11.526**		22.497**
N		589		582

\*\* p < .01, \* p < .05