

Stepping Up or Stopping? Candidate Emergence Among State Legislators

Cherie Maestas, University of Colorado
L. Sandy Maisel, Colby College
Walter J. Stone, University of Colorado

Paper prepared for the Southwest Political Science Association Meetings in
San Antonio, Texas April 1 - 4, 1999

The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance of Sara Alan and Sean Evans at the University of Colorado and Kendra Ammann, Kara Falkenstein, Cathy Fleming, and Lizzie Ivry at Colby College. This paper and the research on which it is based was made possible through a grant from the National Science Foundation, which is, of course, not responsible in any way for our findings or conclusions.

The number of House members who won office after holding a seat in their state legislature grew from thirty percent in 1940 to over fifty percent in 1992. Over seventy percent of House members who hold some prior experience are former state legislators (Berkman 1994). In large part, the increase in the number of state legislators in Congress is not surprising. Many state legislatures have undergone dramatic changes during the last few decades and these changes have greatly enhanced their role as a training ground for ambitious politicians. Political hopefuls can develop valuable legislative skills, campaign skills, and political contacts through winning office and serving in their state legislature. Yet at the same time, this evolution has made many state legislatures an attractive career choice in their own right. High salaries, complex legislative agendas, and ample leadership opportunities allow members to meet many, if not all, of their political goals at the state level. Consequently, state legislative institutions can discourage, as well as encourage progressive ambition.

Despite the central role that state legislatures play in shaping the pool of candidates for the U.S. House, little is known about how the resources and opportunities of the institutions affect legislators' decisions to run for a U.S. House seat. Instead, theories of candidate emergence often implicitly assume that legislators in New Hampshire will weigh the costs and benefits of running for office in the same way that legislators in California will do so. However, there is an ample body of literature to suggest otherwise. State legislatures vary substantially in the resources available to members such as salary, support staff and funds for district offices (Berkman 1994; Pound 1995; Squire 1988, 1988a). In addition, legislatures differ in the opportunities they offer to members to gain personal power through leadership positions (Squire 1995). Because of these differences, it is important to recognize that state legislators make their decisions about running for the U.S. House in the context of the office that they hold. Thus, their costs and benefits are, in part, institutionally driven. Legislators in highly professional institutions are faced with a different set of opportunities and risks than legislators in part-time "citizen" legislatures. (Berkman 1994; Squire 1988, 1988a).

In this paper, we explore how the state legislative context affects the decision of state legislators to run for a seat in the U.S. House. Previous studies of the progressive behavior of state legislators have relied on patterns of aggregate election data (Berkman 1994, Robeck 1982) or patterns of turnover in state legislatures (Squire 1988a) as evidence of the individual level decision process. While the conclusions drawn from these studies are quite suggestive, they cannot directly account for how the institutional context affects an individual's assessment of the costs and benefits of running for office.

Using individual level data drawn from a nationwide survey of state legislators in 200 Congressional districts, we investigate how legislative professionalism affects members' perceptions of the costs and benefits of running for a U.S. House seat, generally, and how professionalism affects the chances state legislators would run in 1998, specifically. We find significant differences in the career ambitions and decisions of state legislators in professional and non-professional legislatures. In addition, members of highly professional legislatures tend to perceive themselves as more likely to win election to the House and are more likely to run for a House seat at some point in the future. However, our analysis shows that members of more professional legislatures are *less* likely to run in a *specific* House race as they more heavily weigh the immediate competitive context of the district.

State Legislatures and the Individual Decision to Run

The launching point into understanding how legislative professionalism affects the emergence of U.S. House candidates lies in thinking about how the characteristics of professional institutions interact with the individual decision process to run for office. Theories of candidate emergence suggest that the key components in the potential candidate's decision process are the candidate's general ambitions for a House seat, the probability of winning office, and the costs involved in obtaining that office (Black 1972; Fowler 1993; Jacobson and Kernell 1981).¹ The relevant question, then, is how are these components affected by the characteristics of the legislative institution?

Chances of Winning

Much of the research on candidate emergence focuses on how the electoral context shapes potential candidates' decisions to run. Clearly, one of the most important determinants of running is the potential candidate's chances of winning since candidates who feel they can win are more likely to run. As a result, scholars find that potential candidates are very sensitive to national, state and local electoral tides, the personal characteristics and strengths of the incumbent, and the partisan make-up of the district (see Fowler 1993; Fowler and McClure 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1981; Krasno and Green 1988; Kazee 1983, 1994; Maisel and Stone 1997; Stone, Maisel and Maestas 1998 among others). Elections where these strategic conditions are favorable will garner a stronger set of challengers as these individuals believe they have a greater chance of winning.

Certainly, the role of winning is paramount in the minds of potential candidates as they are deciding whether or not to run for a House seat. However, the near exclusive focus on electoral factors ignores the role that legislative institutions play in enhancing the potential candidate's ability to meet the challenges of a competitive electoral process. As Berkman (1994) points out, however, little is known about how state legislative context affects the decision to run for Congress.

Yet, there are reasons to believe that institutional structure may have a major impact on individual candidate decision making, as well as on the aggregate pool of candidates. Berkman (1994) convincingly argues that changes in state legislative institutions have altered quantity and quality of the pool of potential candidates for the House. Numerous states have increased their legislative resources such as salary, support staff, and technical infrastructure in an effort to boost policy making capabilities and attract a diverse pool of legislators (Rosenthal 1996; Squire 1988, 1988a). While these changes have undoubtedly helped legislators deal with an increasingly complex set of legislative tasks, these changes have also significantly altered career incentives for members. Legislatures that once appealed to part-time amateurs have become quite attractive to politically ambitious individuals.

An important by-product of professionalization has been an increase in the number of career oriented politicians that are attracted to service in the state legislature. Indeed, Berkman (1988) suggests that this is one reason why the pool of former state legislators in Congress has grown. Politicians with ambitions for a U.S. House seat view the professional legislature as an ideal training ground and stepping stone to their ultimate goal. As such,

¹ The specific model is given as $U(O) = pB - C$, where the incumbents utility for office depends on the probability of winning (p) times the benefit of holding the House seat (B) minus the costs of obtaining that seat (C) (Black 1972; Fowler 1993; Jacobson and Kernell 1981).

professional institutions are increasingly populated by members with progressive career ambitions.

However a second reason for the increase may be that members of professional state legislatures are better equipped to perform well in a competitive electoral environment. Professional institutions provide members with a salary that is sufficient to allow them to devote full time attention to their political career. In addition, progressively ambitious members can seek highly visible leadership positions to increase their name recognition among broader constituencies (Squire 1988). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, state legislators gain repeated experience in running campaigns and winning elections. In conjunction, legislators in the more professional institutions often face very expensive reelection campaigns. The need to raise large amounts of money, combined with assistance from legislative campaign committees, helps legislators develop strong fundraising skills. (Berkman 1994; Gierzynski 1992).

The skills honed by the legislative and electoral context of the professional legislature leave an incumbent well situated to launch a strong campaign for a U.S. House seat. Because of this, when incumbent state legislators choose to challenge incumbent House members, they are more likely to win. Hence, institutional features associated with professional legislatures can be seen as stimulating candidate emergence as they increase the chances their members will win, should they choose to seek a House seat.

Costs of Running

The chance of winning comprises only one aspect of the potential candidate decision calculus, however. The other key component of this calculation is the expected costs of running. These costs include the explicit and implicit costs of running, such as the money and time spent on the campaign, as well as the opportunity costs of running, such as giving up an alternative career. For most potential candidates, including state legislators, the expected benefits of a House seat fall far short of the costs of obtaining the office, in part because the expected cost of winning the office can be quite high. Challengers must endure expensive and, often, negative campaigns. They must give up personal time, job time, family time, and privacy. For the office holder, the costs may be even higher, as they must give up their current office to pursue the Congressional seat. If the office holder wins, the loss of the previous office will be inconsequential. If the office holder loses, however, the loss will be tremendous.

Not surprisingly, many of the strongest potential challengers chose not to enter a House race. These individuals opt to sit on the sidelines rather than squander their personal and political resources in a race against an advantaged incumbent (Fowler and McClure; Jacobson and Kernell 1981; Krasno and Green; Maisel, Stone and Maestas 1998; Maisel and Stone 1997). As a result, most incumbents face a weak challenge from under funded and near-invisible opponents.

The implication of this is that professional legislators may be disinclined to run in any given race, despite their increased chance of winning. The reason for this is quite simple, the legislator's current seat provides him or her with a comfortable political life where many political and personal goals are already met. The cost of losing such a valuable post may cause a legislator to think twice before risking the seat on unfavorable odds. In some cases, not even an open seat will lure the professional legislator away from a high salary and secure seat (Fowler and McClure 1989). Indeed, Squire points out that a number of highly professional legislatures provide incentives and rewards for building a long term career at the

state level. This may dampen ambition for higher office at the same time it raises the opportunity costs of running. Regardless of whether the features of the state legislature serve to dampen the ambitions of members or increase the opportunity cost of running, both reduce the chances that an incumbent state legislator will run in a given race.

Overall Effect of Legislative Professionalism.

Nonetheless, a number of state legislators do harbor ambitions for a U.S. House seat and, at some point in their career, choose to challenge an incumbent. To understand which state legislators are most likely to run and when they may choose to do so, it is necessary to look at the combined effects of professionalism on the costs of running and the chances of winning. Clearly, all potential candidates weigh the expected costs of running against the expected benefits of winning. However, for the politically ambitious state legislator, this calculation is more complex because the characteristics of his office affect both of these components. On one hand, state legislators in professional legislatures are advantaged in the electoral area because of their prior experience winning an election for a desirable legislative seat. On the other hand, potential candidates in legislatures with ample resources and opportunities may be loathe to gamble their seat on an uncertain House election. So, although experienced office holders are ideally poised to challenge an incumbent, the costs of running and losing are higher than the costs for the non-office holding candidate.

What, then, should we expect from the individual behavior of state legislators? The answer lies, we believe, in understanding how the difference in office value affects the strategic calculations state legislators make when deciding whether or not to run. Previous research indicates that experienced politicians behave more strategically than amateur politicians (Banks and Keiwiet 1989; Canon 1990; Krasno and Green 1988). Experienced politicians are quite sensitive to the proximate competitive conditions that are likely to affect the outcome of the House race in their district. Even though these potential candidates possess traits that would make them strong challengers, they are likely to seek seats only when conditions are most favorable for winning, such as when a House seat becomes open. In other words, research indicates that experienced potential candidates, such as state legislators or other office holders, place a heavier emphasis on the prevailing political climate as well as on the competitive qualities of the incumbent. This implies that the relationship between experienced challengers and the electoral context may be *interactive*. That is, the greater the experience the challenger has, the more heavily he or she will weigh the strategic conditions before deciding to enter a race. Thus, small changes in the strategic context can lead to much larger changes in chances of running for the experienced candidate than the non-experienced candidate.

Certainly, this understanding of how experience and opportunity interact applies to the difference between non-office holders and state legislators, but it can also be extended to explain differences *among* state legislators. That is to say, since all state legislators are experienced office holders, we would expect them to behave more strategically than non-office holders. However, we should also expect members of more professional legislatures to behave more strategically than members of less professional legislatures as they have more at stake. Indeed, the research on differences in the career climates of state legislatures reminds us that not all state legislators are equally experienced. Instead, the qualifications and strengths of state legislators span a broad range. The state legislator from the non-professional legislatures of New Hampshire or Wyoming may have little more experience than an amateur politician. In contrast, a state legislator from the highly professional California or Massachusetts legislature may closely resemble the House incumbent in fundraising and campaigning skills. These professional state incumbents recognize that they have the

resources to run a strong race, if the opportunity presents itself. When opportunity arises, such as when an incumbent appears weak or the party fortunes shift, these strong potential candidates surface to challenge the incumbent. However, a slight shift in the opposite direction, such as finding evidence that the incumbent is particularly well funded, may dramatically decrease the chances that the more professional state legislators will run.

In sum, we can derive several testable propositions from the preceding discussion about how institutional context affects the quality of candidates and their decision to run or not run for a U.S. House seat. First, we expect members of more professional legislatures to view themselves as having a greater chance of winning a House seat, should they decide to run. However, we also expect that legislators in more professional legislatures will see the costs of losing their seat as higher than non-professional legislators. Finally, we expect an interactive relationship between the state legislators institutional context and the strategic environment, where more professional state legislators are more sensitive to the prevailing political conditions.

Empirical Analysis

To test these propositions, we use data drawn from a national survey of potential candidates for the U.S. House in 1998. The Candidate Emergence Study is designed improve our understanding of the decision making process that individuals go through when thinking about whether or not to run for Congress, generally, and whether or not to run in a specific year. The list of potential candidates we surveyed was derived from two sources: the suggestions of politically active informants in our sample districts about who would make strong potential candidates, and a list of all state legislators that reside in our sample districts.² This approach allowed us to identify a broad pool of potential candidates *before* the election period of 1998 so that we could investigate their perceptions during the time they were making their final decisions about running. The use of political informants to provide the names of potential candidates allows us to access a the pool of "amateur" candidates as well as office-holders and will facilitate the comparison of these two groups in future analysis. The research question of interest in this paper, however, centers on how state legislators make decisions about running for the House. Therefore, the analysis presented here is based exclusively on the survey responses from the pool of state legislators that we contacted.

Characteristics and Perceptions of State Legislators

During the Fall of 1997 and Spring of 1998, we mailed a nine page questionnaire to 2714 state legislators in our sample districts and we received responses from 875, yielding a response rate of thirty-two percent. The survey was timed to reach the potential candidates in the months prior to the filing date so that we could tap their views while candidates were making their final decisions about whether or not to run in 1998. We asked potential

² The Study builds on the approach taken by scholars in the case study tradition (see especially Kazez, 1994) by relying on informants in the districts to suggest potential candidates. In our study, however, we drew samples of Democratic and Republican informants in each of our 200 randomly selected Congressional districts from lists of national convention delegates and county chairs. We contacted these politically involved individuals and asked them to identify potentially strong candidates for the U.S. House in their district. We encouraged them to think broadly about who such candidates might be and asked them to name individuals in either party, whether or not that individual had ever considered running for public office. Through this, we identified 1392 usable potential candidate names, of which 487 (35%) were state legislators. We added an additional 2227 state legislators that live in the sample Congressional districts to bring the total number of state legislators to 2714.

candidates about their general interest in seeking a House seat, the likelihood they would run now or at some point in the future, and, the likelihood that they would win if they were to run now or in the future. In addition, we sought their views on the characteristics of the voters, parties, and incumbents in their district, their perceptions of their own strengths and weaknesses as potential candidates, and their motivations for seeking office.

Since office holders are faced with additional opportunity costs as well as additional strategic resources that may affect their choices to run for higher office, we asked them a number of questions about the characteristics of the office they currently hold. This allows us to explore how office holders view the resources and opportunities related to their political position and how those might affect their decision to run for Congress. Combining these data with information about the level of legislative professionalism across states provides key evidence of how the legislative environment affects perceptions and decisions of individual state legislators. As such, we can directly test whether state legislators in more professional institutions view the benefits and costs of running differently than legislators in less professional institutions.

<Table 1 about here>

Table one gives an overview of the characteristics of our respondent pool for state legislators. The vast majority of respondents serve in the lower chamber of their state legislature and most are members of their chamber's majority party. Although supporters of term limits express concern over the entrenchment of state legislators, we find only minimal evidence among our respondents. Less than a third of have served eight years or longer in their current position. Instead, most have served between 3 and 7 years. Finally, just under half of our respondents occupy a leadership position in their chamber.

Since the primary purpose of this analysis is to explore how the legislative professionalism affect the qualities, perceptions and decisions of state legislative incumbents, it is important to know how our respondent pool differs across institutions with different levels of professionalism. If professional legislatures, with their associated resources, attract certain types of members or affect their career choices, then we should see a difference in the demographic characteristics and perceptions of members in professional legislatures, when compared to members in non-professional legislatures.

To differentiate between legislatures, we use a measure of professionalism developed by Peverill Squire (1988). This measure is ideally suited for our purposes as it indicates how similar each state legislature is to Congress along three key dimensions: salary, staff and days in session. These are precisely the resources that scholars suggest have altered the compositions and ambitions of state legislative institutions. As such, we expect that legislatures which score high on this measure will have members who are more career oriented and believe they have a stronger chance of winning a House seat, should they choose to run.

To facilitate comparison between professional and non-professional legislatures, we divide the legislatures into quartiles based on the professionalism score and compare the respondents from the highest and lowest categories.³ States falling in the "most professional"

³ These two categories provide the clearest distinction between legislatures as those in the most professional group tend to score highly on all three dimensions while those in the least professional group tend to score low on all three dimensions. The middle groups contain states that are not clearly

group include Alaska, California, Florida, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. States in the "least professional" group include Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, New Mexico and Utah.⁴

Table one shows a clear difference between legislative type and the percentage of members with long term service. Thirty five percent of members in the most professional legislatures have served more than eight years as compared to only twenty percent in the least professional legislatures. Certainly, this is consistent with Squire's argument that professional legislatures tend to attract more members seeking a long term career.

One reason professional institutions prove attractive to career oriented members, Squire suggests, is that they provide internal career opportunities, such as leadership positions. Here, we find that forty six percent of members in the most professional legislatures occupy leadership positions while only thirty-four percent of members from the least professional legislatures do so. So, while we cannot say whether the most professional legislatures offer more leadership positions, we do know that among our respondents, there is an association between professionalism and the chances that a respondent will occupy such a position.

Progressive Ambitions

<Table 2 about here>

Table two provides a more direct test of whether career ambitions differ across institutions. Previous research by Squire (1988, 1988a) and Berkman (1994) suggests that the characteristics of the state legislature serve to attract members with similar career ambitions. Although the characteristics of state legislatures can and do change over time, in the short term, these characteristics are fixed. Hence, individuals deciding whether or not to seek a state legislative seat consider the extent to which the institution will meet their personal and career goals. Highly professional legislatures will typically attract more ambitious individuals as they are attracted to the resources available to help them build a long term political career. In states with non-professional legislatures, politically ambitious individuals may seek alternative offices to satisfy their political goals.

To tap the career ambition of potential candidates, we asked them a variety of questions about their future career plans as well as how they viewed the attractiveness of political careers in different elected offices. Table two indicates that there are significant differences in the long term plans of state legislators in non-professional and professional institutions. A large majority of members in non-professional institutions have no plans to pursue a political career beyond the statehouse. Less than one third expect to seek another elective office. Members of professional legislatures, on the other hand, are much more likely to seek another elective or appointive office when they leave the state legislatures. For these members, the state legislature is but one rung on a longer political career ladder.

differentiated from one another along the lines of professionalism as some have long work sessions with little salary or staff while others have high salary but little support staff.

⁴ Only forty one of the fifty states were included in our sample. Since the sampling unit was the Congressional district, states with few Congressional districts tend to be under-represented in our sample. This leads to a smaller number of states in our sample that fall into the bottom quartile than fall in the top quartile. However, the number of respondents for the bottom quartile states still exceeds those from the top quartile states. This stems from the fact that the ratio of state legislators to Congressional seats is generally higher in states with less professional legislatures as they tend to have fewer Congressional districts.

In addition, we are interested in whether the characteristics of the institution affect members' general orientation toward serving in the U.S. House. Individuals who hold little interest in the House as a political career are quite unlikely to run. Thus, an important determinant of candidate emergence in House races is the individual motivation to seek that office. If professionalism affects the general orientation to run, then this provides an additional conduit through which institutional features affect candidate emergence. We look at this using two different measures, how attractive the House is to the respondents as a career, and the likelihood that the respondent will run for a House seat at some point in the foreseeable future.

Interestingly, we see that there is little difference in the attractiveness of a House career to members in professional and non-professional legislatures. The mean rating of the attractiveness of a political career in the U.S. House fell close to the middle of the seven point scale for both types of legislatures. This indicates that, on average, members' views of a House career do not differ significantly across institutions. It appears, then, that the variation in how state legislators view a House career stems from other sources such as members' views of Congress as a policy arena or the effectiveness and prestige of Congress as an office.

Despite the fact that there is no significant difference in the attractiveness of a House seat across institution types, we do find that members of professional institutions are more likely to run for a U.S. House seat in the future. The difference between the two perceptions most likely stems from how legislators in professional and non-professional institutions view their long term chances of winning office. While the question of office attractiveness only taps how the respondents feel about a career in the House, the question about chances of running at some point in the future taps how the respondent feels about the office, as well as their long range strategic calculations about their ability to win the office. We will return to the latter point of in much greater detail in the following sections as strategic calculations play a central role in the decision calculus of potential candidates.

Perceptions of the State Legislature

<Table 3 about here>

Table three suggests that one reason state legislators in professional institutions are more likely to run is because they believe their legislatures can help them win. On average, state legislators in the more professional institutions believe that their offices provide greater opportunities to secure other elective or appointive offices. Not surprisingly, potential candidates in these legislatures see their long term prospects of winning a general election for the U.S. House as greater, as well. We asked potential candidates to indicate how likely it was that they would win the general election for a House seat, should they obtain their party's nomination. On average, non-professional legislators rated their chances of winning the general election to a House seat at .54, near a toss up, while professional legislators rated their chances of winning much higher.⁵ Notably, as we would expect, there is a statistically significant correlation ($r=.18$) between the opportunities the office provides to progress and the chances of winning a House seat in the future. These findings further support the idea that legislators in more professional institutions view their office as a "stepping stone" to a higher position.

⁵ Respondents were asked about their chances using a seven point scale that runs from 1=extremely unlikely to 7 = extremely likely. This measure was converted to a probability, using .01 and .99 to represent the endpoints of the scale.

However, as Berkman (1994) reminds us, state legislatures can also be a "stopping point." Highly professional institutions also provide members with the type of resources that make long term service in the state institution much more attractive to individuals seeking a political career. As such, the opportunity costs to these members is likely to be much higher than members who are in less fulfilling positions. In other words, the more valuable the office is to the member, the less likely he or she will choose to gamble that position on a House election. If professionalism is related to the value of the state legislative seat and the opportunity costs of giving up the seat, then we should see differences in the perceptions of members in professional and non-professional legislatures on measures that tap these costs.

We test for differences in perceptions of opportunity costs using three different survey measures. The first question is a parallel to the question of House career attractiveness, asking respondents to indicate how attractive a career in the state legislature is to them personally. As we would expect from a sample of state legislators, most rate their attraction as quite high. A full eighty-six percent of state legislators rated their attraction at "high" or "extremely high," yielding a mean rating of 6.11 on a seven point scale. However, variation across legislatures is still apparent. Consistent with research by Squire (1988, 1988a) and Berkman (1994), we find that legislators in more professional institutions tend to rate the attractiveness higher than those in less professional institutions.

In addition to asking about the general attractiveness of office, we also asked two questions that directly address how the opportunity costs of holding office might affect respondents' interest in running for the House. In both cases, the results met our expectations. Members of more professional legislators see the prospect of having to give up the current career and the negative impact of a failed race on their political career as more of an obstacle than members in less professional legislatures. In other words, members of professional legislatures, on average, are more discouraged by the opportunity costs than members of non-professional legislatures. Thus, the difference of means test on both the indirect measure of opportunity cost, the attractiveness of office, and the direct measures of opportunity costs, show statistical evidence that the opportunity costs vary across institutions type.

In sum, tables one through three provide substantial evidence that the perceptions of state legislators differ, systematically, between professional and non-professional legislatures. Moreover, the results provide the first broad-based individual level evidence to support claims that institutions affect the career ambitions of members. In addition, these tables indicate that institutional features also affect key components of the potential candidate's decision calculus. Professional legislators are seen as providing greater opportunity to progressively ambitious members, while increasing the opportunity costs of running to these members.

Legislative Professionalism and the 1998 House Race

The more difficult task, analytically, is sorting out the individual and combined effects of legislative professionalism on the chances of running in a specific House race. Certainly, the preceding analysis suggests several pathways through which professionalism can affect the chances that a state legislator will choose to run for the House in 1998. That is, state legislators who view their chances of winning election as stronger should be more likely to run while those that view their opportunity costs as higher should be less likely to run. Notably, since both of these measures are positively correlated with legislative professionalism but have opposite effects on the chances a state legislator will run, a direct

test of the correlation between professionalism and running reveals nothing. A multivariate approach allows us to more precisely tease out the opposing effects of these different factors.

The dependent variable in our model is state legislators' estimates of their chances of running for a U.S. House seat in 1998. This estimate was given by the potential candidate within the last few months prior to the filing deadline in each state. Not surprisingly, only a scant three percent rated themselves as likely to run in 1998 while over 92% rated their chances of running as unlikely or extremely unlikely. Nonetheless, we can model these chances as a function of the state legislator's strategic environment, the state legislator's orientation and motivations for running for office, and the opportunity costs of running for office.

Strategic Environment: Chances of Winning in 1998

A central explanation for why potential candidates chooses to run or not run in for the House is their perceptions of their chances of winning. These chances depend heavily on the strategic context at the time of the race, such as the strength of the incumbent, the strength of the potential candidate, and the broader political conditions such as party strength in the district (Maisel, Stone and Maestas 1998).

Table four compares the estimated chances of winning and running for members in professional and non-professional legislatures. In the survey, we asked respondents to estimate their chances of winning both the nomination for their party and the general election in the 1998 House race. These measures can be thought of as subjective probabilities, as they indicate the potential candidate's perceptions of his or her chances of winning, given the strategic context in the district. Thus, the potential candidates who believes the incumbent is invulnerable will tend to rate their chances as lower. Similarly, potential candidates who rate their own capabilities as higher will estimate the chances of winning as higher, as well.

The survey responses are based on a seven point scale running from extremely unlikely to extremely likely. However, we convert these categories to probabilities to facilitate interpretation. We treat a response of "extremely unlikely" as representing a .01 probability that the incumbent will win and we treat a response of extremely likely as representing .99 probability that the incumbent will win. Since winning a House seat is a two stage process, we also create a joint probability measure of the chances of winning. This measure captures the overall chances that the potential candidate will win the House seat in 1998 and is simply the product of the probability of winning the nomination and the probability of winning the general election.

Although there is little difference between how non-professional and professional legislators see their chances of winning the nomination in 1998, there is a substantial difference in how they see their chances of winning the general election. On average, potential candidates from professional legislatures see their chances of winning the general election as slightly better than 50/50 while non-professional legislators see their chances of as only 40/60. This leads to a slightly higher overall chance that the more professional legislators will win office. Not surprisingly, state legislators in professional institutions are somewhat more likely to run in 1998 than those in non-professional institutions.⁶

⁶ In this analysis, we look at only those races where the potential candidate will face an incumbent and exclude all potential candidates in open seat districts.

While legislative professionalism does not directly impact the chances that a potential candidate will win, it does have an indirect effect as members of more professional legislatures rank themselves higher on a number of candidate strength variables. There is positive and statistically significant correlation between legislative professionalism and the potential candidate's ranking of their own name recognition, ability to raise money, and public speaking abilities. Each of these, in turn, is positively related to the state legislator's chances of winning in 1998. In addition, members who view their legislature as providing more opportunities to help members win other elective offices also view their chances of winning as higher. These differences help to drive the difference in how non-professional and professional state legislators view their chances of winning the 1998 race. As such, we expect legislative professionalism to affect the chances of running as we expect members with greater chances of winning to estimate their chances of running in 1998 to be higher.

Our second, and perhaps more important, hypothesis is that state legislators in professional institutions will more heavily weigh the strategic context when deciding to enter the race. Since members of more professional legislatures have more to risk, as well as more to offer, in running for a House seat, we expect the strategic context to affect them more than it affects members of non-professional institutions. In other words, we expect individuals in highly professional legislatures such as California or New York to be especially sensitive to the prevailing political conditions. Because professional legislators possess strong skills as candidates, a slight change in the environment that increases their chances of winning will greatly increase the chances that they will run. Of course the alternative is true as well - a slight decrease in their chances of winning can greatly reduce their chances of running as they would prefer to keep their current, valued office. Hence, we argue that the empirical relationship between professionalism, chances of winning and running is interactive rather than additive. We include a variable in the model that interacts the strategic context, chances of winning, with whether the member is in one of the most professional legislatures. We expect a positive and significant coefficient for this variable.

Opportunity Costs and Chances of Running

In addition to this interactive relationship, we also expect legislative professionalism to affect the chances of running through the opportunity cost measures. State legislators in highly professional institutions face higher costs of running for office because they highly value their seats. Even though these legislators have a greater chance of winning, they also stand to lose more if they do not win. As such, we expect to see a negative relationship between the opportunity costs of running and the probability that the state legislator will run.

We include several measures that represent the value of the legislative office in the model of chances of running. The measure of the attractiveness of a career in the state legislature and the potential candidate's estimate of how difficult his seat was to win are both implicit measures of the opportunity costs of running. The attractiveness measure captures the extent to which the state legislator sees the position as a desirable career position. We expect that the greater a state legislator estimates the attractiveness of the state legislature, the less likely he or she will be to run for a seat in 1998. In addition, we expect that the more difficult it was to win the election for the current position, the less likely the potential candidate will run in 1998. In other words, the more difficult it would be to regain the lost seat, the higher the price the potential candidate must pay for a House race.

Similarly, we expect our two explicit measures of opportunity cost to be negatively related to running. We include the measures of how strongly potential candidates are

discouraged from running in the House by: 1) the possibility that they would lose their current career and 2) the negative impact on their political career of losing a House race. As shown previously in table 3, both opportunity costs are positively related to legislative professionalism, indicating that more professional institutions impose higher opportunity costs on the individual. Thus, we expect professionalism to influence the pool of potential candidates through the costs as well as the strategic variables that affect the chances of winning.

Additional Variables.

Finally, we expect that potential candidates may simply differ in their motivations for running for office or becoming politically involved. Some will be highly attracted to a House seat and will be more likely to run than those who are not. Some candidates will have been contacted by party leaders or community leaders encouraging them to run. In addition, previous research suggests that individuals may be motivated by political factors such as wanting to promote their party, or by private factors such as wanting to develop social, business, or political contacts and, some are motivated by a sense of civic duty. We control for each of these factors as well, and expect a positive relationship with chances of running.

Results

<Table 5 about here>

Table 5 indicates that legislative professionalism had both direct and indirect effects on the chances that a potential candidate would run for the House in the 1998 race. As expected, the potential candidate's general orientation toward running, strategic calculations about the chances of winning and the opportunity costs associated with the legislative seat all had some impact on the decision to run.

The most interesting finding, however, is the relationship between chances of running, the strategic context, and legislative professionalism. As we would expect, the state legislator's chances of winning had a substantial effect on the chances he or she would seek a seat in 1998. However, this effect *more than doubles* for state legislators in highly professional legislatures. For most state legislators, when the probability that the potential candidate will win increases by .1, the chance that the potential candidate will run increases by .014. However, for those in highly professional legislatures, the chance of running increases by .035. This is quite a dramatic difference, given the fact that the average chances of running are only .09. Holding all variables constant at their mean, a change in the chances of running from .4 to .5 leads to a change in the chances of running of .1079 to .1229 for legislators in the less professional legislatures. The same change for legislators in highly professional legislatures leads to an increase in chances of running from .1521 to .1823. Clearly, state legislators in professional legislatures are much more sensitive to the competitive context surrounding the 1998 race than those in non-professional legislatures.

What is more significant, however is that for very low chances of winning, such as occur with strong incumbents, the chances that a professional state legislator will run falls *below* the chances that a non-professional legislator will run. Again, holding all variables at their means, the predicted chance of running when the probability of winning is .1 is only .07. If the state legislator holds a seat in one of the most professional legislatures, however, that chance falls to .05. This finding supports arguments such as Banks and Kiewiet's (1989) and Canon's (1990) arguments that inexperienced challengers are more likely to run against a strong incumbents than experienced challengers.

Finally, it is apparent from table five that opportunity costs matter. Three of the four opportunity cost variables impact the chances that the state legislator will run. The more attractive a state legislative career appears to the potential candidate, the more difficult it is to win election to his or her current seat, and the more that the possibility of losing his seat discourages running, the less likely the potential candidate is to run in 1998.

Overall, this model indicates that legislative professionalism has substantial effects on the chances that a state legislator will run for office. These effects are both direct and indirect, as legislative professionalism prompts members in more professional legislatures to weigh the strategic environment more heavily than members in less professional institutions. At the same time, professionalism has indirect effects on the chances of running as it affects the state legislators' chances of winning and the opportunity costs of running.

Conclusions

The analysis presented here provides a first look at how institutional structure affects the decisions of state legislators to run for Congress. However, this analysis leaves a number of questions about how specific institutional resources and attributes might affect potential candidate decisions. For example, do states with stronger legislative campaign committees produce stronger candidates than state without those committees? Do states that tightly regulate campaign finances of members reduce the strengths of state legislators as potential candidates as they have fewer opportunities to develop contacts for fundraising for House elections? Finally, does the decision process for legislators facing term limits differ substantially from the decision process of legislators who do not face such limits? These question each have important bearing on the pool of state legislative candidates as they affect the context in which the individual decisions take place.

Developing a better understanding of how specific aspects of the legislative context affect the potential candidate decision process at the individual level is important as it helps us better understand how changes in the legislative structure affect the pool of potential candidates over time. This especially important as we become increasingly concerned about the lack of strong challengers in House elections. Not only do incumbents overwhelming win reelection, many incumbents do not even face major party competition. In 1998, a full 86 House races were uncontested. This is troubling because strong challengers are an important conduit of representative democracy. Challengers provide citizens with a meaningful choice between governing philosophies and policy positions as well as raise the salience of political issues. Certainly, the quality of representation depends on the awareness and choice that voters have in political races and the strength of challengers plays a central role in that choice. The analysis in this paper suggests that institutions are also an important influence on the choice that citizens have in House elections. Certainly, the role of institutions in the development of candidates warrants further study.

References

- Banks, Jeffrey S. and D. Roderick Kiewiet. 1989. "Explaining Patterns of Candidate Competition in Congressional Elections." *American Journal of Political Science*. 33:4 (997-1015).
- Berkman, Michael B. 1994. "State Legislators in Congress: Strategic Politicians, Professional Legislatures and the Party Nexus." *American Journal of Political Science*. 38:4 (1025-55).
- Bond, Jon R., Gary Covington, and Richard Fleisher. 1985. "Explaining Challenger Quality in Congressional Elections." *Journal of Politics* 47:510-29.
- Brady, David W., L. Sandy Maisel, and Kevin M. Warsh. 1994. "An Opportunity Cost Model of the Decision to Run for Congress: Another Contributor to Democratic Hegemony." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, New York, September 1-4.
- Canon, David T. 1990. *Actors, Athletes, and Astronauts: Political Amateurs in the United States Congress*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fowler, Linda L. 1993. *Candidates, Congress, and the American Democracy*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Fowler, Linda, and Robert McClure. 1989. *Political Ambition: Who Decides to Run for Congress*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gierzynski, Anthony. 1992. *Legislative Party Campaign Committees in the American States*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Herrnson, Paul S.. 1995. *Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 1996. *The Politics of Congressional Elections*. 4th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 1990a. "The Effects of Campaign Spending in House Elections: New Evidence for Old Arguments." *American Journal of Political Science* 34:334-62.
- Jacobson, Gary, and Samuel Kernell. 1981 (2nd edition, 1983). *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kazee, Thomas A. 1983. "The Deterrent Effect of Incumbency on Recruiting Challengers in U. S. House Elections." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 8:469-80.
- Kazee, Thomas A. 1994. *Who Runs for Congress? Ambition, Context, and Candidate Emergence*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Krasno, Jonathon S., and Donald Philip Green. 1988. "Preempting Quality Challengers in House Elections." *Journal of Politics* 50:920-36.

- Maisel, L. Sandy and Walter J. Stone. 1997. "Determinants of Candidate Emergence in U. S. House Elections: An Exploratory Study," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 22:79-96.
- Maisel, L. Sandy, Walter J. Stone and Cherie Maestas "Candidate Emergence in U.S. House Elections" Paper Presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, September 2-5, 1998 Boston, MA. "
- Mann, Thomas E., and Raymond E. Wolfinger. 1980. "Candidates and Parties in Congressional Elections." *American Political Science Review* 74:617-32.
- Pound, William. 1995. "State Legislative Careers: Twenty-Five Years of Reform" in *Changing Patterns in State Legislative Careers* Eds. Gary F. Moncrief and Joel A. Thompson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Robeck, Bruce W. 1982. "State Legislator Candidacies for the U.S. House: Prospects for Success." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 7:507-14.
- Rosenthal, Alan. 1996. "State Legislative Development: Observations from Three *Legislative Studies Quarterly*. 21:169-198.
- Schlesinger, Joseph A. 1966. *Ambition and Politics: Political Careers in the United States*. Chicago: Rand McNally and Co.
- Schlesinger, Joseph A. 1991. *Political Parties and the Winning of Office*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Squire, Peverill. 1988. "Member Career Opportunities and the Internal Organization of Legislatures" *Journal of Politics* 50:726-44.
- Squire, Peverill. 1988a. "Career Opportunities and Member Stability in Legislatures" *Legislative Studies Quarterly*. 13:65-82.
- Squire, Peverill. 1995. "Changing State Legislative Leadership Careers" in *Changing Patterns in State Legislative Careers* Eds. Gary F. Moncrief and Joel A. Thompson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Weber, Ronald E., Harvey J. Tucker and Paul Brace. 1991 "Vanishing Marginals in State Legislative Elections" *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 16:29-46.

Table 1: Characteristics of State Legislator Respondents

	All State Legislators	Members of Least Professional Legislatures^a	Members of Most Professional Legislatures^b
Total respondents	100% (875)	23% (229)	20% (178)
Lower chamber members	77% (674)	79% (181)	76% (135)
Upper chamber members	23% (200)	21% (48)	34% (43)
Served over 8 years in current office	27% (236)	20% (46)	35% (61)
Member of the majority party	61% (518)	61% (138)	57% (96)
Occupies leadership position	42% (352)	34% (76)	46% (78)

a. These are legislators that serve in states which score in the bottom quartile of Squire's measure of legislative professionalism. States included in our sample that fall in this category are AL, AR, GA, IN, KY, ME, NM, and UT.

b. These are legislators that serve in states which score in the top quartile of Squire's measure of legislative professionalism. States included in our sample that fall in this category include AK, CA, FL, HI, IL, MA, MI, NJ, NY, OH, PA and WI.

Table 2: State Legislators' Career Ambitions

	All State Legislators	Members of Least Professional Legislatures^a	Member of Most Professional Legislatures^b	Difference Between Most and Least Professional Legislatures	
Future Plans					
Plan to return to private life after leaving this office ^c	60%	68%	51%	17%*	
Plan to seek another elective position after leaving this office	34%	29%	40%	11%*	
Views of the U.S. House					
Attractiveness to respondent, personally, of a career in the U.S. House ^d	4.09	3.99	4.21	.22	
Chances of Running for a House seat in the foreseeable future ^e	.32	.31	.34	.03*	
	smallest N	813	211	166	*p t <.05

a. These are legislators that serve in states which score in the bottom quartile of Squire's measure of legislative professionalism. States included in our sample that fall in this category are AL, AR, GA, IN, KY, ME, NM, and UT.

b. These are legislators that serve in states which score in the top quartile of Squire's measure of legislative professionalism. States included in our sample that fall in this category include AK, CA, FL, HI, IL, MA, MI, NJ, NY, OH, PA and WI.

c. The question asks potential candidates to indicate whether they plan to return to private life, seek an appointive elective office or seek another elective office when they leave their current office.

d. The response scale runs from 1, "extremely low" to 7, "extremely high", with 4 as "toss-up"

e. Respondents were asked to give the chances they would run for a U.S. House seat in the foreseeable future. This question was scaled from 1, "extremely unlikely" to 7, "extremely likely." The raw scale was converted to a probability measure with the end points set at .01% and .99%.

Table 3: State Legislators' Perceptions of Opportunities and Opportunity Costs

	All State Legislators	Members of Least Professional Legislatures^a	Member of Most Professional Legislatures^b	Difference Between Most and Least Professional Legislatures
Opportunities available to help members win higher offices ^c	4.86	4.72	5.09	.37*
Chances of winning the general election for a U.S. House seat in the foreseeable future ^d	.59	.55	.66	.11*
Attractiveness to respondent, personally, of a career in their state legislature ^e	6.11	5.97	6.27	.29*
Discouraged from running by the negative impact on political career if he/she were to lose ^f	1.48	1.33	1.63	.30*
Discouraged from running by having to give up current career ^f	1.65	1.57	1.85	.28*
smallest N	813	215	164	*p t < .05

a. These are legislators that serve in states which score in the bottom quartile of Squire's measure of legislative professionalism. States included in our sample that fall in this category are AL, AR, GA, IN, KY, ME, NM, and UT.

b. These are legislators that serve in states which score in the top quartile of Squire's measure of legislative professionalism. States included in our sample that fall in this category include AK, CA, FL, HI, IL, MA, MI, NJ, NY, OH, PA and WI.

c. This measure is scaled as a probability with a maximum value of 1.

d. The response scale runs from 1, "extremely low" to 7, "extremely high", with 4 as "fair."

e. The response scale runs from 1, "extremely low" to 7, "extremely high", with 4 as "toss-up."

f. The respondent was asked to indicate how much this factor would influence his or her interest in running for the U.S. House. The responses are scaled 1=makes no difference, 2=somewhat discourage, 3=discourage, 4=strongly discourage.

Table 4a: State Legislator Chances of Running for and Winning a Seat in the U.S. House, All Legislators

	All State Legislators	Members of Least Professional Legislatures	Members of Most Professional Legislatures
Chances of Running in 1998	.09	.07	.09
Chances of Winning the Nomination	.26	.25	.26
Chances of Winning the General Election	.44	.40	.52
Overall Chances of Winning^c	.13	.12	.13
Smallest N	705	195	137

a. These are legislators that serve in states which score in the bottom quartile of Squire's measure of legislative professionalism. States included in our sample that fall in this category are AL, AR, GA, IN, KY, ME, NM, and UT.

b. These are legislators that serve in states which score in the top quartile of Squire's measure of legislative professionalism. States included in our sample that fall in this category include AK, CA, FL, HI, IL, MA, MI, NJ, NY, OH, PA and WI.

c. This is the joint probability of winning a House seat in the 1998 elections and is calculated as (Chances of Winning the Nomination * Chances of Winning the general election).

Table 5: OLS Models of Chances of Running for U.S. House seat in 1998 (standard errors)

		Interactive Model
Independent Variables		
	Overall chances of winning in 1998	.14** (.04)
	Member of most professional legislature	-.040* (.020)
	Chances of winning * member of most professional legislature	.21** (.08)
	Contacted about running in 1998	-.000 (.001)
General Orientation to Run		
	Attractiveness of career in U.S. House	.014** (.003)
	Motivated by political reasons	.003 (.006)
	Motivated by private/career reasons	.008 (.007)
	Motivated by duty	.008 (.010)
Opportunity Costs		
	Attractiveness of career in state legislature	-.011* (.006)
	Loss of current position	-.013* (.007)
	Impact on political career if lose	.008 (.010)
	Difficulty in winning general election for own office	-.009** (.004)
	Constant	.001*
Adjusted R-square		.10
F (df)		6.30 (12, 581)
N		594

**p |t| < .05 *p |t| < .10