

Discussion Questions for 17.951, Political Behavior

Congressional Elections

- What are the classic explanations for the incumbency advantage? What do we mean by incumbency advantage? Are these advantages due to personal or party characteristics?
- How has the nature of incumbency advantage changed over time?
- Why do challengers sometimes win? What are the characteristics of successful challengers?
- What is the role of money in congressional campaigns?
- What are the main differences between House and Senate campaigns? Why are Senators more likely to lose?
- How would you characterize turnout in congressional elections – level of turnout, who votes, how turnout affects outcomes?
- How explain the fact that the president's party tends to lose seats in midterm elections? And how explain the exceptions to this regularity in 1998 and 2002?
- What are the factors in congressional voting? How important are party identification and defection, personal characteristics of the candidate and district service vs. party/ideology/policy. Does the weight of these factors change over time?
- How can economic or national conditions matter for congressional races? What is strategic politicians theory?
- Democrats held power in the House for 40 years. Why did they hold party control for so long, and how did the Republicans achieve party control in 1994? What are the prospects for Republicans having a long hold on power?