Jamie L. Carson*

Gary C. Jacobson and the Politics of Congressional Elections

DOI 10.1515/for-2016-0035

Abstract: Gary Jacobson is one of the world's leading experts studying US congressional elections. This essay examines his contributions to political science over the past 40 years.

On July 1, 2016, Gary Jacobson retired from the University of California at San Diego after an extremely distinguished research and teaching career that spanned over 40 years. He completed his PhD from Yale University in 1972, where his primary advisor was David Mayhew. Gary's first tenure-track position was at Trinity College in Connecticut and he taught there for nearly a decade before moving to the University of California at San Diego in 1979 as an associate professor. He was promoted to professor at UCSD in 1983, spent 1 year as a professor at Stanford University during the 1986–1987 academic year, spent the 1990–1991 year as a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavior Sciences before serving as chair of the Department of Political Science at USCD from 1993 to 1996. Following this, Gary was promoted to Distinguished Professor of Political Science in 2004 in light of his outstanding contributions to research, service, and teaching.

Gary's research fits squarely in the areas of American politics and political behavior, with an emphasis on elections and electoral behavior. He has published seven different books on a wide range of subjects including money in elections, political parties, the politics of congressional elections, divided government, polarization, and the presidency. Gary has also published well over 100 articles and book chapters on a variety of related topics, but is best known for his work on congressional elections. Most scholars who study US elections regularly utilize his measures in their work. In light of his contributions to date, Gary is one of the world's leading authorities on congressional elections in the United States and is regularly cited and sought out by major news outlets for his insights and observations on elections in this country.

It is difficult to discuss all of the major contributions that Gary has made in his 40+ year career, so let me instead focus on some of the most important ones.

***Corresponding author: Jamie L. Carson,** Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, USA, e-mail: carson@uga.edu

One of Gary's earliest and most widely cited publications is his 1978 article in the *American Political Science Review*, "The Effects of Campaign Spending in Congressional Elecitons." In one of the first systematic analyses of spending in congressional elections, Gary identifies a somewhat counterintuitive, but nevertheless important, finding – the more money incumbents spend in elections, the worse they appear to do overall. As he clarifies, it is not spending per se that hurts incumbents, but rather the fact that they must spend large sums of money in order to win reelection. This is often in response to the experienced or high quality challengers running against them. Challengers, in contrast, tend to see a direct reward from spending larger sums of money given their relative lack of name recognition compared with incumbents and therefore, get more "bang from the buck."

Gary published a related book project 2 years later, *Money in Congressional Elections*, building on the findings from his 1978 *APSR* article. Drawing on a wealth of campaign finance data for congressional elections from the 1970s, Gary reaches several important and surprising conclusions about the effects of incumbent and challenger spending in US House elections. Most notably, he confirms the previous finding that campaign spending matters the most to non-incumbent candidates. Based on extensive empirical evidence from these elections, he finds that whether or not campaigns are seriously contested depends almost entirely on the resources that are marshaled by the challengers. In contrast, the amount of money that incumbents raise and spend appears to have little effect on the outcome of the election. As noted previously, this is most likely a function of incumbents already possessing high levels of name recognition compared with lesser known challengers. On those rare occasions when incumbents do face a high quality challenger, they often end up spending large sums of money in their reelection campaigns, which has little or no effect on the outcome, in light of the formidable opponent they face.

Just 1 year later, Gary published a related book on congressional elections that would forever change the way we think about ambition and candidate behavior. In their now classic study of challenger emergence, Gary and his colleague, Sam Kernell, examine whether candidates exhibit strategic behavior in deciding whether or not to seek office. Through an examination of aggregate patterns of candidates' career decisions, they speculate as to the underlying motivations for politicians' behavior. As their theory is premised on rational calculations, they argue that experienced candidates are more likely to run for the House when national and partisan conditions are more favorable in terms of their likelihood of success. Jacobson and Kernell test their theory of strategic behavior on data from the 1974, 1980, and 1982 congressional elections and find convincing evidence in support of their hypotheses concerning strategic

politicians. Not only do they conclude that experienced challengers wait until conditions are optimal before they decide to run (i.e. when there is an open seat or a vulnerable incumbent as reflected by prior vote share or excessive spending in a prior election), they also find that strategic politicians play a pivotal role in determining the results of both district-level elections and the overall partisan composition of Congress.

Several years later, Jacobson (1989) offered additional evidence in support of the strategic politicians theory by testing it against congressional elections data from 1946 to 1986. Through his examination of elections data during this period, he finds that experienced challengers do not emerge arbitrarily. Rather, their likelihood of running varies with their perceived chance of winning. Indeed, Jacobson concludes that a greater proportion of experienced or quality candidates emerge when prospects appear favorable to their party. As a result, he argues that strategic decisions by congressional candidates, based on factors such as the likelihood of victory, value of the seat, and opportunity costs, both reflect and enhance national partisan tides. In support of his contention that high quality or experienced politicians act strategically, he recognizes that quality challengers are more likely to emerge when a seat is uncontested and they rely increasingly on an incumbent's prior margin of victory and spending patterns as an important cue in deciding whether or not to run. This article continues to be widely cited by congressional elections scholars and has established the benchmark by which we measure candidate quality in elections research.

At roughly the same time Gary was analyzing the effects of campaign spending and strategic behavior of candidates, he was also working on a larger book project analyzing congressional elections from the post-WW II era to the present. In 1983, he published the first edition of *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, which has become widely adopted in courses on legislative politics, electoral behavior, and congressional elections given the countless insights that Gary provides. Earlier this year, the ninth edition of the book was released by Rowman & Littlefield, and I was especially excited to be included as a co-author on that project. In college, I recall reading the third edition of Gary's book, and remember thinking at the time how provocative some of his findings were and that I would love to work on something like this 1 day. Little did I know that Gary would ask me to join him as a co-author and eventually take over authorship of it when he retired. I was extremly fortunate and truly enjoyed having the opportunity to work with him on the latest edition.

In recent years, Gary's interest in elections has remained, but his research into other related areas has evolved as well. For some time, Gary has been interested in the dramatic increase in partisan polarization in Congress and has investigated a variety of potential causes and explanations for this increase. In 2007,

Gary published a new book analyzing the increasing polarization entitled, *A Divider, Not a Uniter: George W. Bush and the American People*. The premise of the book is quite simple – Gary seeks to understand why the George W. Bush presidency has evoked the widest partisan divisions in over 50 years based on analyses of an extensive number of public opinion surveys. Adopting a title that is a variation on a statement once made by Bush, Gary shows that the Bush Presidency did much more to exacerbate partisan tensions than to actually unite the country. He provides a wide assortment of evidence throughout the book in support of these conclusions.

One of Gary's strengths as a political scientist has always been his overall curiousity regarding empirical patterns. He carefully analyzes the data in question, calls attention to any new patterns, and seeks to place the results into a broader historical context. A recent article published in the *Journal of Politics* on the nationalization of House elections perfectly illustrates this behavior. Beginning in the early 1970s, a variety of election scholars began to document the relative ease with which incumbents were reelected and explored several potential explanations for this phenomenon. In addition to contributing to this important literature, Gary was among the first to recognize an important trend during the past two decades – the electoral advantage enjoyed by US representatives has steadily declined in recent elections as a result of increasing nationalization of elections. Indeed, his 2015 *JOP* article shows that the incumbency advantage is at its lowest since the 1950s. As such, House incumbents now have a much more difficult time retaining districts that lean toward the rival political party. As polarization continues to increase in the US, it appears that this trend toward greater nationalization may endure for the forseeable future.

In summary, this brief review has only highlighted a few of Gary Jacobson's major contributions to the field of political science and the study of congressional elections more specifically. His post-election analyses always offer unique insights into the most recent House and Senate elections as well as the growing impact of national trends on these local and statewide races. Gary began working in the area of congressional elections research at a time when very few scholars felt such efforts were worthwhile. Much has changed in this regard since the 1970s given even a cursory review of the literature on House and Senate elections. For several decades now, scholars studying congressional elections have used his congressional elections data in their own research, which he always generously shares with members of the political science community as well as other interested parties. His enduring legacy to our profession is a richer understanding of congressional elections and his tremendous generosity in sharing elections data.

References

Jacobson, Gary C. 1978. "The Effects of Campaign Spending in Congressional Elections." *American Political Science Review* 72: 469–491.
Jacobson, Gary C. 1980. *Money in Congressional Elections*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Jacobson, Gary C. 1989. "Strategic Politicians and the Dynamics of U.S. House Elections, 1946–86." *American Political Science Review* 83: 773–793.
Jacobson, Gary C. 2007. *A Divider, Not a Uniter: George W. Bush and the American People*. New York: Pearson Longman.
Jacobson, Gary C. 2015. "Its Nothing Personal: The Decline of the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections." *Journal of Politics* 3: 861–873.
Jacobson, Gary C., and Samuel Kernell. 1981. *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Jacobson, Gary C., and Jamie L. Carson. 2016. *The Politics of Congressional Elections*. 9th ed. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Jamie L. Carson is Professor of Political Science at the University of Georgia. He is broadly interested in the study of American politics and political institutions with an emphasis on congressional politics and elections, APD, and separation of powers. In 2013, he published *Ambition, Competition, and Electoral Reform: The Politics of Congressional Elections Across Time* with Jason Roberts at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He recently co-authored the ninth edition of *The Politics of Congressional Elections* with Gary Jacobson.